



# The Downing Street Chief-of-Staff: a case study in political management

Max W. Stafford<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The role of Downing Street Chief-of-Staff has been neglected by examinations of British Politics, prime ministers, and political leadership and management. This is despite the role having existed since 1997. This article is a “first move” in correcting this omission. The Chief’s responsibilities are difficult to define but cover oversight of the political operation within 10 Downing Street. This includes Human Resources; “gatekeeping”; being the PM’s closest adviser; institutional reforms; and other related functions. The article uses a theoretical framework drawn from the emerging literature on political management (Lees-Marshment, in *Political management: the dance of government and politics*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2021) to provide an understanding of *what* the Chief does and *why* it is important that we comprehend it better. It focuses upon how chiefs have undertaken the four “D’s” (deliberating, designing, doing, and dancing) of political management and what insights can be gleaned from this evidence. Application of this framework helps to reveal key developments of chiefs’ work in a structured and detailed manner.

**Keywords** Chief-of-Staff · Political management · Special advisers

## Introduction

What connects ex-diplomats, civil servants, a government minister, a past director of Vote Leave, a businessman, and a former local government leader? Such a question might be the start of a particularly boring joke. The reality is that there is a common link between them all and it is a serious one. All of these people have been the Downing Street Chief-of-Staff.

Since 1997, this role has either been done by someone formally possessing the title “Downing Street Chief-of-Staff” or, during the periods October 2008–May

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✉ Max W. Stafford  
max.stafford@btinternet.com

<sup>1</sup> The Mile End Institute, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS, UK



2010 and July 2019–December 2020, by a person operating as *de facto* chief. Chiefs have variously had views on institutional reform, policy and party management (Beckett and Hencke 2004; Blick and Jones 2010; Powell 2010; Timothy 2020). For a prime minister's, who is also their party's leader, most senior adviser, this is not surprising. Yet, the role itself has been under-researched and, as such, little understood, despite the centrality of this role to the performance of prime ministers (PMs) and their offices. So great is the potential influence and power of a chief-of-staff, it is possible to argue that existing understandings of the British premiership are thus incomplete.

Therefore, this article addresses the following questions:

- (1) What is the current general extent of the literature covering the role?
- (2) Given the role's pre-occupation with the practice of political management, what insights into the role can be obtained from the perspective of political management theory?
- (3) Where might a coherent research agenda examining the role go next?

Due to the early-stage nature of this research, it has only been possible to draw upon auto/biography, academic examinations of the British premiership (especially its use of advisers) and relevant journalism. Though a brief overview of this is provided, by way of a literature review, this is clearly a further area that needs expansion (particularly through the creation of new primary data). Notwithstanding these limitations, it is possible to begin to sketch answers to Questions 1–3 and create a base for future depth studies. Indeed, the author is currently undertaking interviews, in order to fill this knowledge gap.

For ease of reference, a table of the chronology of the Downing Street Chiefs of Staff is provided in Appendix (Table 1). There is some dispute within the literature as to precisely when the role came into existence. Some include David Wolfson, who served as Chief-of-Staff of the Political Office during Margaret Thatcher's premiership (1979–1990) (Hennessy 2001, p. 411). However, Wolfson's role was limited to the purely party-political side of the Prime Minister's Office, thus being a much more restricted role than the one that modern chiefs have inhabited (Brown 2019, p. 59). Contemporaries (such as then-Private Secretary Andrew Turnbull) have argued that Wolfson's more limited role suggests that the title "Chief-of-Staff" was a misnomer (Turnbull, cited in Brown 2019, p. 59). Thus, the role, as currently understood, has only existed since the 1997 appointment of Jonathan Powell (Weller 2018, p. 85). This article covers the period 1997–2022 (Powell to Daniel Rosenfield).

Table 1 includes those not formally titled Chief-of-Staff but who were *de facto* chiefs. Tom Scholar absorbed the responsibilities of the chief into his existing job as Principle Private Secretary, a permanent civil servant, reflecting Gordon Brown's desire to depoliticise roles in the centre of government (signalling change from Tony Blair's Downing Street) (Blick and Jones 2013, p. 296). Stephen Carter, titled Director of Strategy, was explicitly brought into Brown's operation in order to lead it in the same manner as a chief and was treated as such



by advisers and ministers (Balls 2016, p. 213). Jeremy Heywood subsequently resisted the idea that he *had* been chief, precisely because of not having used the formal title (Heywood, cited in Institute for Government 2016). However, brought in as a Civil Service counterpart to Carter, Heywood likewise undertook many of the same responsibilities and gained even greater recognition as a *de facto* chief after Carter's 2008 departure (Blick and Jones 2013, p. 307). Dominic Cummings was titled Chief Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister but accepted the job only on condition that he was recognised as Downing Street's most senior adviser (including with powers to hire and dismiss other advisers) (Rhodes 2023, p. 100). Recognition that this status made him *de facto* Chief has been provided elsewhere, not least by Rhodes (2023, p. 100).

## Literature review: the gap

There is a clear gap within existing literature concerning British politics, political leadership (especially with regards to the PM), and advisers. That gap concerns the Chief-of-Staff. It includes questions around: the changing nature of the job and its status; chronicling its history; and assessing the impact of the role on government processes and policy. A single article cannot address all these points in the depth needed, but it can lay foundations for such work.

There is much literature about the role of special advisors at the centre of British government. Yong and Hazell (2014) provided us with a substantial study of what they do and how they operate, whilst Blick and Jones (2013) offered similar insights (with an especial focus on their relationship to the PM). Meanwhile, Eichbaum and Shaw (2008; 2010; 2011) have produced a substantial body of work on the comparative study of advisers. This has been further supplemented by Westminster system-specific studies by Craft (2016), Maley (2015), and others. This is to name but a few. There is, then, a sizeable body of work covering advisers—generally, comparatively, and within specific national contexts. What is lacking is work on the Downing Street Chief-of-Staff and their significance.

Much of the existing literature that does touch upon the role of the Chief is contained within books. “Touches” is perhaps the best description, as most of the writing is contained within works on the PM or the development and reform of modern government (see Kavanagh and Seldon 1999; Barber 2015; Davis and Rentoul 2019; Bower 2020). There is no standalone work where the core focus is on the role, its function and development. Those that come closest are still at one-step-removed—memoirs and similar work by former chiefs giving insight into the experience of *being* Chief (Powell 2010; Timothy 2020; Barwell 2021). The lack of variation in the literature (journal articles, edited collections and books *specifically* exploring the post) illustrates one of this article's contentions—the need to correct the omission of studies directly examining the Chief.

Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) and Whipple (2017) have written about equivalent roles in Australia and the USA, respectively. Whilst Whipple explored the role in a different system (presidential), Rhodes and Tiernan examined the role within a Westminster-type system. This offered the chance to “place” the role within the



wider context of a PM's office and its nature as a *political*, rather than ostensibly permanent civil service, role. It does create a precedent for examining chiefs in Westminster systems. Despite their different system focuses, both books highlighted a key aspect of being a chief—the role of “gatekeeper”. This alludes to ‘...filtering who they [the principal whom they serve] see and how and where they spend their time’ (Rhodes et al. 2014, p. 2). Kate Fall (Deputy Chief, 2010–2016) chose to title her own memoir *Gatekeeper*, in recognition of this aspect of her work (Fall 2020). Gavin Barwell (Chief, 2017–2019) read Whipple’s book, when taking on the role, as a kind of “how-to” primer (Mile End Institute 2020).

Hennessy (2001, p. 477) cited an anonymous prime ministerial aide under Blair who suggested that chiefs were, essentially, head of a *quasi* “prime minister’s department”. Whilst there is no formal Prime Minister’s Department (an Office of the Prime Minister was being created towards the end of the Johnson premiership) in the United Kingdom, Number 10 certainly acts as a central organ of the government machine (Thomas 2022a). The chief may be seen to function as its political “fixer” or senior special adviser. Indeed, Weller (2018, p. 85) described them as ‘... the pivot around which the prime minister’s partisan office is organized...’.

One of Powell’s key criteria was that they should command the PM’s trust, whilst his brother (Charles Powell, a civil servant in Thatcher’s Downing Street) suggested that senior *political* aides should be able to ‘...“beat the bushes of Whitehall pretty violently...”’ in seeking to ensure that a PM’s will is implemented (Powell 2010, p. 87; Powell, cited in Hennessy 2001, p. 424). Weller (2018, p. 84) has described the Chief-of-Staff as being a PM’s ‘comfort zone’, saying that chiefs provide a sounding board that can be trusted by the PM because they are ‘...not rivals or those with agendas, but their own people’.

Thomas (2022b) summarised the Chief’s functions thus

- ‘Being the prime minister’s most senior political adviser
- Managing other political advisers
- Working closely with the prime minister’s principal private secretary
- Working with the wider team of private secretaries to try to get the government machine to do what the prime minister wants
- The gatekeeper role: sitting outside the prime minister’s office and controlling who gets in and who doesn’t
- Seeing what the prime minister sees, and accompanying them to meetings
- Brokering deals with other ministers’

Understandably, many may wish to see the role more fully defined—through the provision of a job description or similar. However, this is not possible. First, one of the fascinations about this role is that there simply is *not* anything so banal (and helpful) as a job description to consult. The requirement for one, including in order to add transparency to the post’s recruitment, has recently been noted elsewhere (Stafford 2024). Second, as apparent below, each PM has made different demands of chiefs. This variation makes it difficult to propose a composite of what *exactly* chiefs do. Thus, though the Thomas definition may justifiably be called broad brush-stroke, it will have to suffice here. Better defining the role, including with regard



to the specific duties and responsibilities attached to it, is an imperative for future studies. The need for this is underlined by a brief anecdote. In 2020, the author of this article discussed his interest in chiefs with a much-respected British Politics researcher. They responded by asking “How can you study a role which doesn’t exist?” It *does* exist—what is lacking is understanding of who does it and what their work comprises.

This reflects the fluidity of roles at the centre of government. The *de facto* nature of some chiefs’ appointments rather illustrates this. As noted in the analysis section of this article, there is often change to the structure of Downing Street and the units within it (including the Blair-era Delivery Unit, Johnson-era Union Unit, and others). This brings with it new roles (heads of these units and those staffing them in more junior capacities). This has been covered elsewhere by Blick and Jones (2010; 2013), Barber (2015), Brown (2019), Garnett (2021), and Clement (2022). Fluidity is picked up, below, in examples concerning the lack of a chief during the early Brown premiership, clarity around chiefs’ duties in the initial period of May’s premiership, and the recruitment of a Press Secretary under Johnson.

Powell (2008; 2010), Fall (2020), Timothy (2020), and Barwell (2021) have all published accounts of their service. Suzanne Heywood has also provided a biography of her husband (Heywood 2021). Whilst these are often broader accounts of the premierships during which they served, they provide an opportunity to review the relevant period from each chief’s perspective and gain greater insight into their duties.

So, there is a lack of work covering the specifics of what the Chief does, how they do it, and why this matters. This article is a mere “first-step” and does not, therefore, pretend to fill the entire gap. It does, however, give some direction for how it may be filled, particularly with regard to the use of political management theory.

## **Theoretical Approach: political management, not core executive**

Studies of this kind might be expected to turn to Core Executive theory. First published by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) in 1990, the Core Executive approach sought to emphasise ‘...the collection of institutions that coordinate policy in central government, rather than privileging particular institutions, such as the prime minister or the cabinet’ (Elgie 2011, p. 64). It makes particular use of the idea of resource dependency. This is the concept that actors in the Core Executive exchange resources (Craft...money, legislative authority or expertise...) in order to achieve goals and maximise their advantage (Rhodes 1997, p. 203). It does, therefore, have application to the study of chiefs. Elgie (2011) even identified Core Executive approaches as the orthodoxy for such studies.

However, even orthodoxies are superseded. A newer approach in the study of advisers and the operation of government offices is that of Political Management Theory. This takes some of the same elements of Core Executive studies (the use & deployment of resources and the relationships that this generates) but develops it further. It does so by offering a new, structured, framework for analysis of the evolving range of political management roles now present at the centre of government.



This is not to say that Core Executive approaches are now moribund. It is, rather, to suggest that researchers into political advisers now have a toolkit available to them, partly informed by the Core Executive approach, which has more direct application to adviser's management roles. As Craft (2015, p. 58) identified, such approaches fill gaps left by Core Executive studies with regard to the need to '...capture the potentially important function of political staffs as actors who participate in resource exchanges or are *themselves* resources...'. This article reflects this evolution in its own approach—applying a political management framework to help illuminate, for the first time, consideration of chiefs' varied and previously opaque work. A form of homage to Rhodes' Core Executive is provided in the use of vignettes (described as 'a narrative device' that helps 'to illuminate theoretical issues') within each application of the framework (Rhodes 2023, p. 99). This further reflects Bevir and Rhodes' (2021, p. 156) own bricoleur approach, whereby 'we recover evidence in the form of stories, and we then recount our interpretations of these stories using different genres'.

Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2021, pp. 7, 14) defines political management as '... about getting things done...', before expanding that it is about how practitioners hire, manage, lead, organise, and motivate. It covers how political managers use resources (rules, procedures, budgets, people, etc.), to deliver key priorities, design and implement strategies, and facilitate the work and objectives of their political principal (for instance, a PM) (Lees-Marshment 2021, p. 14).

Lees-Marshment (2021, p. 21) argues that political management comprises four "D's". These are deliberating, designing, doing, and dancing. Deliberating is '...creating or understanding the organisation's mission statement, and from this setting the vision for short-term plans and actions to fulfil the mission' (Lees-Marshment 2021, pp. 21, 210). This includes ensuring that staff and working culture for which a manager is responsible reflect and pursue the mission and vision. Designing covers '...planning what to do, using information and understanding from deliberating to create strategic goals and plans...' whilst both recruiting staff who have the competencies and loyalties required and organising them in ways which will allow them to fulfil tasks (Lees-Marshment 2021, p. 215).

Doing is the fundamental aspect of political management - the act of implementing goals and strategies (Lees-Marshment 2021, p. 224). This includes establishing effective working relationships within teams and choosing how to balance management styles between being authoritative (relying upon formal powers) and facilitative (inspiring, and delegating powers) (Lees-Marshment 2021, p. 224). Dancing is described as '...the more nebulous yet tremendously powerful aspect of political management...' (Lees-Marshment 2021, p. 230). It focuses upon the pragmatic use of internal tactical manoeuvring and adaptive leadership.

Lees-Marshment (2021, p. 117) herself has described the centrality of Chiefs to political operations and the need to better understand their impact as managers. Thus, the article's examination is structured around the "D's", with vignettes from across the period 1997-2022.

Political management theory continues to develop as an area for further study and application to empirical work. There is a gradually expanding body of work in this area, with more scholars applying it to case studies (see Lees-Marshment



2024a). This includes examination of specific elements of political management—such as human resources (Lees-Marshment 2024b), media strategies (Johansson 2024; Fisher 2024), and even chiefs (Stafford 2024). It is emerging as an approach that furthers existing theoretical approaches and, as importantly, has been applied to empirical methodologies. To this end, political management theory has growing purchase within the study of political offices and advisers and it is in that vein that it is applied here.

## Analysis: Chief-of-Staff as Political Manager

### Deliberating

Evidence suggests that UK PMs often take the lead on much of the deliberating aspect themselves, especially regarding the government's mission statement. Chiefs may play a role in this but, more often, are to be found at the forefront of implementing this mission. Different case studies, here, illustrate the unevenness of this aspect from premiership to premiership.

Brown began by seeking to differentiate his premiership from that of Blair's decade in power. This included changes to the Downing Street machinery, with Brown not appointing a chief. He gave the role's responsibilities to Tom Scholar, the then-Principal Private Secretary (PPS), to carry out alongside his other duties (Blick and Jones 2013, p. 296). The PPS is a senior civil servant within the PM's private office, traditionally leading on co-ordinating administration and connections with other Whitehall officials (Seldon et al. 2021, pp. 165–166). However, Brown soon decided that this arrangement was not working, especially as it was not allowing him to adequately set the *political* direction of his government (civil servants, such as the PPS, are banned from partisan activities) (Balls 2016, p. 274). He appointed Carter (a former businessman) and Heywood (a former PPS who returned to this role) to share the duties of a *de facto* chief (Durrant and Tingay 2022). Carter was expected to help Brown establish both a political narrative for his government and focus for his Downing Street operation (Price 2010, pp. 420–421). Heywood took over responsibility for co-ordinating the administrative work of the different teams within Number 10 (Heywood 2021, pp. 210–213). Carter's appointment did not work out in the long-term, due to his inability to establish working relationships with existing political staff, Heywood remained in-post for the remainder of Brown's premiership and is credited with having helped the government operate more effectively (especially once the 2008–2009 Financial Crisis arrived) (Davis and Rentoul 2019, p. 311; Garnett 2021, p. 114). Thus, we have an example of how a PM came to *need* a *de facto* chief, in order to give greater effect to their deliberating and delivery.

By comparison, multiple sources attest to the fact that Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill were heavily involved in deliberating aspects of the May premiership between 2016 and 2017 (Blackburn 2016; Jackson 2018; Seldon and Newell 2019). Both worked for May previously, during her time as Home Secretary, and therefore had long-established working relationships. They were key organisers of her Conservative Party leadership campaign (2016) and had long sought to prepare May for the





premiership, with one anonymous official saying that they “...made her into [the] Prime Minister. I don’t think she would have gone on to be Prime Minister without them.” (Anon., cited in Seldon and Newell 2019, p. 55). They not only had a solid sense of the mission that she wished to pursue but were also instrumental in its shaping. Timothy wrote the speech that May delivered in Downing Street (upon her July 2016 appointment as PM) when she first set out her vision (Ross and McTague 2017, p. 32). Hill then mounted copies of the speech on the walls of every Downing Street office (Cockerell 2021, p. 320).

Hill and Timothy tightly controlled both how May received submissions from her wider team (which may seem natural, given their position in her private office) and on policy, reportedly even seeking to reopen debates around (unspecified) decisions with which they disagreed (Ross and McTague 2017, p. 40). Behaviour such as this led dissatisfied ministers and officials to brief the media that they regarded the chiefs as behaving like unaccountable *quasi* deputy prime ministers who were central to the government and its mission (Mason et al. 2017; Walker 2022, p. 138). This was a major contributing factor to ministers’ subsequent criticisms of a ‘...closed and non-consultative style...’ that left the PM distanced from even her own Cabinet (Russell and James 2023, p. 95).

The latter May premiership (dating from after the 2017 General Election) saw a refreshed deliberating period. Hill and Timothy both departed after the election, taking some of the criticism for the loss of her majority, and Barwell (a former Member of Parliament and minister) replaced them (Russell and James 2023, p. 111). He identified the need for a change in Downing Street’s working culture and, therefore refocussed the May premiership on seeking a better relationship with Parliament (Russell and James 2023, p. 111). By his own admission, this did not translate into success around the government’s main policy issue—Britain’s exit from the European Union—given that May was forced to resign over failure to pass her proposed deal (Barwell 2021, p. 1).

## Designing

The role of chief in designing is often a central one. Barwell alluded to it when describing the importance of chiefs in setting the tone for the wider team’s work (Barwell 2021, p. 23; Seldon and Snowden 2016, p. 259). Chiefs must translate leaders’ visions into masterplans for operations, with team buy-in. It is at this point that it crosses over into doing, yet there remain several examples of involvement in designing.

By virtue of being the first chief, Powell was well-placed to consider how to make Downing Street operate in a manner which suited a PM. The creation of the role of Chief-of-Staff was, in itself, evidence of designing taking place. Immediately after taking office, this was furthered by consideration of whether Powell should also occupy the post of PPS (Powell 2010, pp. 20–21; Heywood 2021, pp. 63–64). This idea was subsequently abandoned, due to Civil Service concerns about potentially





diminishing the PPS' role in sensitive matters such as the awarding of honours and relations with the monarch (Seldon et al. 2021, pp. 165–166). However, the fact that it was mooted demonstrates the extent of earlier thinking about the potential scope of the post of Chief-of-Staff.

Powell (2010, pp. 102–103) subsequently wrote about one of the more mundane designing-type tasks that he was regularly involved in. Blair would circulate a weekend memorandum to senior advisers, detailing thinking on both short-term challenges and longer-term planning (Powell 2010, pp. 102–103). Powell, along with other figures such as Alastair Campbell (Director of Communications) and figures from the Downing Street Policy Unit, then met with Blair early during the following week, to discuss practicalities. This was compounded by daily breakfast-time instructions that Blair gave to Powell regarding overnight changes in thinking (Katz 2008). This moved towards aspects of “doing”, when considering how specific actions might be taken to give immediate effect to the PM's wishes.

Powell offers further insight into how chiefs undertake designing. In 2001, Richard Wilson (Cabinet Secretary) proposed merging the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office (Powell 2010, p. 80). This was intended to address Blair's complaint that he lacked the resources of the Treasury in driving his agenda in Whitehall (Powell 2010, p. 80). Powell (working with John Birt, strategic advisor, on plans for reforming Number 10) counter-proposed (and subsequently implemented) the absorption of key Cabinet Office functions into the Prime Minister's Office (including the heads of the European and Foreign Policy Secretariats) (Powell 2010, p. 80). More significant were Powell's reasons for resisting Wilson's proposal of, in effect, a “Department of the Prime Minister”. Powell later recounted how he believed that such a department would mirror the ‘...ossified, slow and overly bureaucratic...’ departmental structures that Blair found frustrating (Powell 2010, p. 81). Here, then, we have evidence of a chief who not only sought to deliver the PM's desire for operational redesigning but who also resisted certain structures in favour of those which they believed would better achieve required objectives. The chief was not only a functional part of designing but was, significantly, one of its strategic architects.

Once again, Timothy and Hill offer us insights. Their division of roles, as joint chiefs, was never clarified. Giving evidence to a 2020 parliamentary inquiry, Hill testified that she and Timothy could have better-defined how they were going to divide oversight of policy, press, and political functions between them (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, HC 835 2020, Q64). There was much contemporary reporting that Timothy was to lead on policy, whilst Hill oversaw media relations (despite there being a separate Director of Communications) (Ross and McTague 2017, p. 35). However, the division was much less clear-cut. For instance, *both* were heavily involved in negotiations with Donald Trump's 2016-2017 transition team about May's subsequent visit (January 2017) (Darroch 2020, pp. 117–118). Likewise, *both* were concerned with strategic thinking about the 2017 election and were heavily involved in trying to establish policy narratives (Cockerell 2021, pp. 320–322). This confusion over responsibilities may have resulted from the shorter-than-anticipated period for a transition to a May



premiership (following Andrea Leadsom's withdrawal from the 2016 Conservative Party leadership election). However, it demonstrates that, whilst deliberation elements were focussed around their relationship with May, there was a considerable absence of clarity related to design. Thus, we can see that chiefs being dominant in setting the mission for the premiership they serve under does not automatically translate to competent execution in relation to design. This lack of clarity underscores the dangers that can come from occupying roles without a job description to delineate responsibilities.

This leads to a further point, raised by Barwell's tenure. When he arrived, Barwell made it clear that he wished to enhance Number 10's capabilities regarding legislative management and engagement. He introduced the Legislative Affairs Unit (LAU), headed by Nikki da Costa (Barwell 2020). The LAU was responsible for 'building bridges with the parliamentary party' and planning the legislative timetable (Mace 2020). It reported directly to Barwell (Urban 2023). This reflected not only a chief identifying a need for altering Downing Street's operation but, as importantly, being empowered with responsibility for redesigning it. da Costa eventually quit May's Downing Street (before returning, during Johnson's premiership) but the LAU endured.

With regard to alterations in staffing, the example of the 2020 selection of a new Press Secretary is instructive. However, this example reflects how chiefs' influence can be limited. In 2020, Lee Cain (Director of Communications) suggested to Cummings that they should change from holding daily lobby press briefings in private to having them televised (akin to the US White House's practice) (Ashcroft 2022, p. 217). Their intention was to change the political relationship between Downing Street and the media (reputedly disdaining private lobby briefings as being emblematic of an opaque Westminster culture) (Walker 2022, p. 187). They sought to recruit a new press secretary (who would present the briefings). They shortlisted candidates and were reported to favour journalist Ellie Price (Payne 2022, p. 28). However, Allegra Stratton (formerly Press Secretary to the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak) was selected by Johnson, despite Cummings not regarding her as a stronger candidate (Ashcroft 2022, p. 217). Others have since suggested that this was due to direct lobbying of Johnson by both Sunak and the PM's wife (a former political adviser) (Payne 2022, p. 28).

What matters here is not so much *why* Stratton was chosen but, rather, that Cummings' attempt at significant operational change in Number 10 was hijacked by others' priorities. Cummings himself was often described as a major influence in Downing Street, having been described as almost a *quasi*-revolutionary in his desire to see root-and-branch changes to government operations (Cockerell 2021, p. 303; Bower 2020, p. 424). This included his 2020 appeal for "assorted weirdos" and scientific thinkers to come into government and help him disrupt orthodox thinking on policy (Rose et al. 2020). However, in the case of Stratton's appointment, we find that even very influential and powerful chiefs can encounter limitations when



undertaking designing elements of their work. It serves reinforce the message that chiefs do, ultimately, rely upon the support the prime minister.

## Doing

"Doing" revolves around the day-to-day practice of government. This includes how working practices are implemented, offices organised and managed, and strong working relationships are formed within what has often been described as a *court* rather than an office (Institute for Government 2013, p. 4; McDonald 2022, p. 90). This latter point refers to the concept that ministerial offices are centred around ministers, with advisers acting as competing '...courtiers dancing attendance...' upon them (Rhodes 2013, p. 331). Several case studies illustrate this aspect of chiefs' political management.

Kate Fall's experience of working as Ed Llewellyn's deputy demonstrated how good working practice is observed and replicated. Fall (Fall 2020, p. 81) recalled how, soon after arriving in 2010, she noticed files stacking up on Llewellyn's desk every time that there was a major issue. When she asked him why he was receiving such information and she was not, Llewellyn replied that it was because he was proactively requesting them (Fall 2020, p. 81). Subsequently, Fall ensured that she took the same approach. They also established a good division of responsibilities—the opposite of Hill and Timothy. Having worked together throughout Cameron's period as Leader of the Opposition, they established a division of labour that saw the former focussed on policy and government operations, whilst the latter took the role of gatekeeper and managed Cameron's schedule (Letwin 2017, pp. 151–152; Seldon et al. 2021, p. 53). Llewellyn, a former diplomat, also advised on foreign policy (for instance, writing the PM's 2013 speech announcing a future referendum on EU membership) (Seldon and Snowden 2016, p. 56; 261). Collectively, this allowed for an office that was more cohesive and structured than May's initial team (Oates 2020, p. 330).

The Chief's role in deciding upon office accommodation also shapes the reality of "doing" political management. Multiple authors and former advisers have attested to the importance of office accommodation in what is an old and haphazardly apportioned building (Brown 2019; Stafford 2022, p. 12). It was this that led Powell to twice (unsuccessfully) encourage Blair to seek more suitable office accommodation (Powell 2010, p. 17). Of particular value in this environment is physical proximity to the PM. Brown (2019) has written about how greatly this is sought. It matters as much of government business still occurs through chancing upon PMs in-passing and, therefore, being able to raise issues with them directly.

One of the parts of Downing Street that is frequently discussed with regard to its location within this myriad of offices is the Policy Unit (PU). The PU evaluates department's policy proposals and works on asserting the PM's own will in these areas. In 2020, Cummings (formally titled Chief Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister) moved the PU to the Cabinet Office (one building along from Number 10) (Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, HC 67 2021, p. 14). This was part of his intention to disrupt existing practice. The innovation did not last



(due to Cummings' own departure in late 2020), signifying how innovations of very influential chiefs can be easily reversed. In the political management of UK chiefs, power and innovation in operation do not equal permanence.

Finally, Rosenfield's experience illustrated how much chiefs must successfully manage court politics. In his context, chiefs are embedded in managing the working relationships and styles that Lees-Marshment suggested were integral to "doing". Rosenfield struggled to assimilate into the court. Given his background as a former PPS (in the Treasury), one might have expected him to have done so with ease (Durrant and Tingay 2022). However, contemporary media reports and subsequent books (Balls 2021; Ferguson 2021; Payne 2022, p. 255) suggested that he never became comfortable with the party-political nature of his appointment (which he occupied as a special advisor, rather than official). Rosenfield left the Partygate scandal (2022), regarding the breaking of COVID-19 social-distancing regulations in Downing Street (Durrant and Tingay 2022). However, he seems to have been struggling to assert his will and style within the court long before his exit. Samuel Kasumu (2023, pp. 254–256), a special adviser for some of this period, suggested that Rosenfield's status as a previously non-partisan '...political outsider...' left him lacking the political judgement that PMs rely upon. This led to the media briefings alluded to earlier, with a common criticism being that Downing Street '...was not working well for the prime minister' (Kasumu 2023, p. 256). If a chief is to exercise authority, they must clearly be able to inspire confidence that they are furthering the PM's agenda. Rosenfield provides us with an example of how decline in internal confidence in a chief can obstruct their political management.

## Dancing

The internal, tactical, manoeuvring Lees-Marshment referred to as "dancing" can be observed in the practice of chiefs. To a certain extent, of course, many of these examples could be regarded as crossing over with doing, as they both occupy similar timeframes (the daily operation of government, as well as longer-term manoeuvring within the court). Words such as "manoeuvring" may, when considered within this context, seem to carry negative connotations (for instance, manoeuvring *against* another aide or undermining competing objectives). However, it can be positive, if matched to the other aspect of dancing. This is adaptive leadership—the ability to modify both objectives and practice according to changing situations. In this latter light, manoeuvring may just be tactical steps that allow chiefs to reorientate Downing Street for new strategic contexts and challenges.

The necessity of dancing is demonstrated by the case studies of Carter and Rosenfield earlier in this article. Their lack of success in manoeuvring themselves into more authoritative positions meant that their management was ultimately undermined. This contributed considerably to their eventual departures. Multiple accounts attest to Cummings' influence and dominant style. Kate Bingham has written about how it was Cummings who pushed for an industry-led taskforce in the search for



COVID-19 vaccines, seeing it ‘...as part of his wider instincts on the need to shake up UK Government’. (Bingham and Hames 2022, p. 23). However, regarding Stratton, he failed to influence Johnson and manoeuvre the situation towards his own satisfaction. This all underscores the centrality of dancing. It may be, as Lees-Marshment suggested, a more nebulous-sounding “D”, but its relationship to the pragmatic use of personal relationships and adaptation makes it essential to chiefs. The repetition of these case studies also indicates the closeness of different “Ds”.

By comparison, Llewellyn’s tenure offers insights into how chiefs may dance successfully. He was central to Cameron’s efforts to negotiate a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010 and joined the Conservatives’ negotiating team (Durrant and Tingay 2022). He has been credited by both Conservatives and Liberal Democrats alike with being key to making the Coalition relationship work (Laws 2017, pp. 67–68; Letwin 2017, p. 193). He was even criticised by Fraser Nelson, a right-of-centre journalist, for being so successful that he was felt to have de-politicised much of the policy process between both parties (Nelson, cited in Institute for Government 2013, p. 3). One anonymous source went further, telling Seldon and Snowdon (2016, p. 236) that he was the ‘...“ultimate protector of the coalition”...’. Johnny Oates (2020, p. 330), Llewellyn’s Liberal Democrat counterpart, credited Llewellyn with taking an adaptable, pragmatic, approach to policy divergences, in order to ameliorate potential conflict.

This adaptability was reflected in his approach to internal party management. Andrea Leadsom (2022, p. 62), a Eurosceptic Conservative, noted how Llewellyn attended meetings of a party grouping that sought reform of Britain’s relationship with the EU. Though, as Leadsom noted, he was an avowed Europhile, Llewellyn made the group feel listened to (with the understanding being that he, in turn, had Cameron’s ear) (Leadsom 2022, p. 62). Indeed, Cameron’s evolving European policy illustrates one further element of Llewellyn’s adaptability. He has been described as worried about the prospect of an EU (Darroch 2020, p. 65). However, once Cameron committed to it, Llewellyn worked to helping deliver the policy and, as noted earlier, authored Cameron’s 2013 speech (Seldon and Snowdon 2016, p. 261). Thus, we see a chief who remained consistent in their personal belief about a policy issue but was able to adapt to an evolving decision in order to secure implementation. It is, of course, possible that his former diplomatic experience (mentioned by ministers as being reflected in his calmness and loyalty) aided him in this flexibility (Mitchell 2021, p. 150; Patten 2018, p. 108).

Finally, tactical manoeuvrability can demonstrate the importance of chiefs’ networks in their work. This is demonstrated by their role in cabinet reshuffles. A short example from Barwell’s tenure is instructive here. In November 2018, May faced the resignation of Dominic Raab as Brexit Secretary (Seldon and Newell 2019, p. 490). This was difficult, politically, as it was the second resignation from that post. Other figures (including existing ministers) were approached but, for various reasons, rejected the offer of the post (BBC 2018; Dickson 2018). Eventually, Steve Barclay (himself a future chief under



Johnson) was appointed. This was down to Barwell knowing Barclay personally and, thus, believing that he was someone who would be loyal to May (BBC 2018). This demonstrated how essential chief's networking can become to the survival of premierships.

## Conclusions and Future Research: Where next?

We can see that certain insights are revealed about the role, significance, and evolution of the Downing Street Chief-of-Staff. It is not an “even” account—chiefs are focussed upon some “D’s” more than others. They are more often to be found designing, doing, and dancing, and less deliberating. Given the operational focus of their role, this is not surprising. Different requirements and working practices of individual PMs clearly impact upon where and how chiefs focus their workload (and is a topic for further investigation). Lessons drawn from their greater involvement in the latter three “D’s” help us, of course, to begin to define the duties of a role that lacks a job description. This final section summarises the analysis provided, before identifying future avenues for research.

This article has found that PMs, not chiefs, tend to drive the deliberating phase in Downing Street's political management. PMs establish their mission, with chiefs then helping with implementation. This is not an absolute and there have been occasions when chiefs have been involved in deliberating. Timothy and Hill's relationship with May exemplified this. Likewise, PMs sometimes realise that they have deficiencies in their deliberation and seek help from either an existing or new chief. Brown's experiences illustrated this, demonstrating how the introduction of a chief was seen as the solution to issues surrounding deliberation and cohesion. It may not have worked on this occasion, given Carter's subsequent departure, but it was still an affirmation of chiefs' increasing importance.

Powell's position as the first chief allowed him to play a role in deliberating on how Downing Street could operate differently. The debate about whether to appoint him simultaneously as PPS may have come to nought but it demonstrated the scope of deliberation about how far-reaching changes to Downing Street should be. Future chiefs were more closely involved in policy, but Powell's position as the first inevitably accorded him an advantage in terms of *opportunities* to innovate, irrespective of how far they were pursued.

Chiefs are more involved in designing. This can cross over into doing but chiefs still undertake design-specific elements. Indeed, they often lead on designing and undertake this responsibility for PMs. This is not always successful. Hill and Timothy's difficulties in delineating roles and responsibilities are a case-in-point. This points to one of the key difficulties of having adviser roles without clear and established job descriptions (even if these were to change, between premierships). Conversely, the *same* premiership saw Barwell able to implement significant design-based reform of Downing Street's structure, through establishing the LAU. We



might tentatively conclude that, though the personalities involved matter, the Chief's lack of role definition makes it easier to pursue when sole-occupied (rather than when held jointly).

Cummings' experience in being overridden regarding Stratton underlined the fact that, no matter how powerful the individual, chiefs remain reliant upon PMs' patronage. This could in turn be a cause for conflict if chiefs were to be left feeling continually obstructed or redundant. Further qualitative research might be able to identify whether this has been significant since 1997.

Chiefs' frequent pre-occupation with operational matters and daily events means that they play a significant role in doing. It often encompasses primarily functional tasks but this does not mean that this is an area absent of innovation. Cummings' physical relocation of the PU testifies to this. In this case, the departure of the chief also signalled the experiment's end. Nevertheless, it was an example of the direct involvement of a chief in key decisions about how Downing Street's operation.

Chiefs must also inspire confidence and maintain positive working relationships. Carter, Timothy, Hill, and Rosenfield all demonstrated the potential outcomes of failing in this. Barwell's initial work was pre-determined by his predecessors' legacy and the need to restore morale. Without the ability to inspire staff and cohere them around common goals, chiefs cannot truly be said to be making the office work for PMs.

Lees-Marshment argued that dancing was central to political management and should not be disregarded merely because of its more nebulous-sounding label. This article has demonstrated this to be true. Adaptability, the capacity for manoeuvring, and the ability to use networks effectively are all essential to strong performance. Chiefs' networks can even play a role in sustaining the premierships they serve (including during reshuffles). This is compounded by the ability to embed their own position within the court. This aspect runs throughout their duties and is a constant consideration.

This article has both demonstrated the utility of political management theory when examining a key adviser role in UK politics and, more specifically, given impetus to the task of better understanding the role of Downing Street Chief-of-Staff. This is only an initial step in the latter of these undertakings. It is hoped that future qualitative examinations will be able to provide deeper and more detailed analyses of the role's history, significance and, fundamentally, purpose. This could, in time, help to give greater insight into both the role's impact and, consequently, the functioning of the British premiership itself. For now, let it stand as a motivation for further such studies.

## Appendix 1

See Table 1.





**Table 1** Downing Street Chiefs of Staff, 1997–2023

Prime Minister	Chief-of-Staff (official)	Chief-of-Staff (de facto)	Dates as Chief-of-Staff	Special Advisor?	Civil Servant?	Other roles combined with
Tony Blair	Jonathan Powell		May 1997–Jun 2007	✓		
	Gordon Brown	Tom Scholar	Jun 2007–Jan 2008		✓	Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
David Cameron		Stephen Carter	Jan 2008–Oct 2008	✓		Director of Strategy
		Jeremy Heywood	Jan 2008–May 2010		✓	Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister; Downing Street Permanent Secretary
		Ed Llewellyn	May 2010–Jul 2016	✓		
	Theresa May	Nick Timothy	Jul 2016–Jun 2017	✓		
Boris Johnson		Fiona Hill	Jul 2016–Jun 2017	✓		
		Gavin Barwell	Jun 2017–Jul 2019	✓		
			Jul 2019–Nov 2020	✓		Chief Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister
			Jul 2019–Nov 2020	✓		Prime Minister's Chief Strategic Adviser
			Nov 2020–Jan 2021	✓		Prime Minister's Chief Strategic Adviser
		Eddie Lister (acting)	Jan 2021–Feb 2022	✓		
Liz Truss	Dan Rosenfield		Feb 2022–Jul 2022	✓		
	Stephen Barclay		Jul 2022–Sept 2022	✓		Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster / MP
Rishi Sunak	Simone Finn (acting)		Sept 2022–Oct 2022	✓		
	Mark Fullbrook		Oct 2022 – present	✓		
	Liam Booth-Smith			✓		



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