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The Central Executive Territory

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CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL STUDIES

*British Government:
The Central Executive
Territory*

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Preface

This book is concerned with what I call the Central Executive Territory, the collection of politicians, administrators, groups, offices and units at the centre of the executive branch of British government. The book aims to give an account, not to argue a thesis. It assumes that political institutions are significant as well as interesting. It further assumes that British government at the centre cannot be pinned – or penned – down in one simple phrase: prime ministerial, presidential, cabinet-shaped, parliamentary (though these occur in the book); and that political activity is normally diverse, variable and pluralistic. This suits the purposes of an introductory book, since the aim in a reflective subject like this is not to preach the verities, but to stimulate vigorous and careful thinking.

The ground covered is wide and largely hidden from the direct inspection of academics. The writer of a book of this kind must therefore declare very heavy debts to the scholarly journalists and diarists and biographers who have transformed the available account of British government at the centre. Quite simply the book could not have been attempted without the writings of Peter Hennessy, Peter Jenkins, Peter Riddell and Hugo Young, and the diaries of Barbara Castle, Richard Crossman and Tony Benn; among academics, the work of John Mackintosh; among prime ministers, the books of Lord Wilson. It will be evident that many others have contributed substantially to the stock of information and ideas on which I have drawn. I salute them all

and trust they will look sympathetically on my attempt to represent in shorter and simpler form the new understanding of government at the centre which we owe to them.

The book was completed in November 1990, during the last days of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. The account of the office of prime minister offered here was already post-Thatcherist, presenting Mrs Thatcher's historic tenure of office as lying in one segment of the range of prime ministerial modes. Her prime ministership was nevertheless stimulating and illuminating for the understanding of government in the Central Executive Territory, and it raised serious questions about the nature of political leadership.

I am grateful to John Benyon, the editor of the series, for suggesting the topic; to the editors of Simon and Schuster for their assistance and support; to Oxford Polytechnic for a generous contribution to the costs of research; to Diana Woodhouse for indispensable help in the early stages of research; to the Bodleian Library, and in particular the librarians of the PPE Reading Room, for helpful and unobtrusive service; and to my wife, Olive, for dealing on the word-processor with my partial relapse from 'direct input' to the humble ballpoint pen, and coping with the usual abstractedness of an author in travail.

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