Selection

Selection: who are The Colleagues?

Fifty years ago the Government included only about 60 ministers, one third of them in the Cabinet. By contrast, a modern government includes about 110 ministers, ranging from the Prime Minister and 20 or so members of the Cabinet through Ministers of State to the humblest Parliamentary Private Secretaries (unpaid posts of assistant to a minister, much increased in numbers since the 1960s). Thus about one third of the majority party in the House of Commons constitutes the Government, but only one in seventeen or so ministers is in the Cabinet. Every minister is bound by loyalty (‘the payroll vote’), ambition and the convention of ‘collective responsibility’, which enjoins silence or support. Within this large group of ministers are ‘The Colleagues’, the Prime Minister and senior ministers, most of them members of the Cabinet, and amounting to about one-fifth of the total ministerial complement.

The Colleagues who make up a British government have emerged as colleagues in parliamentary and party politics, sometimes over years in opposition. The team (or ‘squad’ in sporting terms – the select group from which the team is chosen) emerges from a selection process based on performance in the
House, acceptability to the party’s members of Parliament and ideological position or leaning. In the Labour Party in opposition, election to the Shadow Cabinet and even to the party’s National Executive Committee may ensure selection to the group of colleagues in government; though a leader of the Labour Party enjoys some freedom of action, especially as Prime Minister. Conservative prime ministers face no formal restraints but, like all prime ministers, must construct a Cabinet which is related to sections and support within the party.

Selection: political friends and enemies

In the composition of the Cabinet, some colleagues impose themselves by party status and/or following, regardless of their empathy, or lack of it, with the leader; in particular those whom the leader ‘vanquished to achieve the Crown’ (Bruce-Gardyne 1986, p. 20). The Prime Minister must take some advice (from Chief Whip or elder statesmen, say) without consulting widely on what must in the end be a personal and sometimes painful choice. Apart from personal and political considerations that choice is constrained by the need for lawyers, a Lord and a lady, and an approximation at least to a Scotsman and a Welshman. One final constraint is that posts and persons must match up. ‘The process of Government-making is a jigsaw, in which all the pieces must somehow be made to fit’ (ibid., p. 21). It is evident that prime ministers use some jobs to park particular people, friends, enemies – the Overseas Development Ministry has been used in this way, sometimes in, sometimes out, of Cabinet.

Thus the Colleagues are selected initially by self and party and finally by the Prime Minister, and even the most dominant Prime Minister must live and work perforce with enemies as well as friends, or in one formulation, with enemies and functionaries as well as sycophants. For example, Wilson’s first Cabinet included few political friends, only two or three who had voted for him in 1963. Wilson manoeuvred against Callaghan but dared not dismiss him, and left Brown to destroy himself. It was only after Brown’s resignation that Wilson began to feel some trust in his Cabinet.

The record of Wilson’s cabinets is of constant grouping and regrouping: there was always an inner circle, but its membership