It is difficult to remove the personal from the institutional. Agency and structural factors in the analysis of political leadership go hand in hand (Skowronek 1997). The interactionist framework combines the institutional resources available to a prime minister with the personal. Personal prime ministerial style can have an impact on the running of the private office, the policy agenda, advisory structures, the management of cabinet and collegial relationships. This and the next chapter, however, focus more specifically on aspects of personal prime ministerial resources. Personal resources relate to those that can be identified as belonging to the individual. The chapters consider two key questions: What are the attributes that a particular prime minister brings to the position and how do these attributes enhance political capital and enable a prime minister to become predominant?

This chapter explores the personal political skill and political strategy of Blair and Howard. This breaks down into five elements: (1) character – the skills relating directly to personality (including background, integrity and morality) of the individual; (2) bargaining – coalition skills, people-management and interpersonal relations; (3) heresthetics – political manoeuvres; (4) rhetoric – political communication skills; (5) strategic and tactical aims. Bargaining, heresthetics and rhetoric relate to the strategies or political skills deployed by the political leader on a micro level. Strategic and tactical aims are the broader visionary skills deployed on a macro level.

Contemporary leadership has – in part, due to the growth of the mass media – seen personality emphasised. Heywood has provided an explanation: ‘As society becomes more complex and fragmented, people may increasingly look to the personal vision of an individual leader to give coherence and meaning to the world in which they live’ (2002: 349).
Leaders as prime ministers not only have an impact on individuals and the institutions that govern them, but also on wider aspects of social life and even beyond domestic borders. Walter (2006a) draws attention to the tension between the liberal and democratic strands in liberal democracy, in that leadership does not fit into either the liberal perspective of individual rights and freedoms or the democratic perspective of collective decision-making. The issue is dealt with by attempting to constrain leadership in liberal democracies; checks and balances attempt to limit powerful individuals. Yet powerful individuals can shape and stretch existing institutions and loosen the shackles (Bennister 2007). Much that makes these individuals powerful comes from beyond the formal institutional or executive arena. It may be strength and type of personality, use of communication tools and image projection. It may be dominance of the traditional political party and beyond. Prime ministers have also been shown to set the agenda and structure choices of interdependent actors in the core executive (O’Malley 2007).

Character as skill

Political leaders use and stretch the power resources available and individual character, style and personality are factors. As noted in Chapter 1, James Barber’s (1992) study of US presidents argued that personality shaped presidential performance, while Little (1985) (drawing on earlier work by Lasswell (1967)) identified ideal types of leaderships. The common thread in much of this psychological analysis is that individual character and personality impacts on the leadership style and so provides an incumbent prime minister with enhanced political capital. Character may be based on background, and personality shaped by experiences prior to gaining office. The following considers briefly the background of the two leaders and assesses how this impacted on leadership style in office.

Howard grew up in a Sydney suburb, went to a state school and then studied law at Sydney University. He practised as a solicitor for several years before entering federal parliament in 1974 at the age of 35 (Barnett and Goward 1997; Errington and Van Onselen 2007). Class, background and experience, though, may not be such obvious markers of leadership as once they were. Adams describes Howard as ‘an enigma’ and identifies eight different competing and complementary views of the man in office. Howard can be viewed as the ruthless politician, the tough hard-hearted conservative, the suburban solicitor, the ‘believer’, the leader governing for all of Australia as Menzies’ successor, the ally of America, the man