A contemporary prime minister can draw on personal power resources that link the incumbent directly to the electorate and, in turn, distance the incumbent from institutional aspects (such as party, leadership rivals and the executive). As such, a prime minister can be strengthened by personal association with electoral success and the sound handling of a crisis. Yet, equally, a personalised prime minister can suffer, as the process makes a leader vulnerable to changes in public opinion. Heffernan (2005a) emphasised that personal power resources are conditional depending on factors that are contextual and contingent. Greater personalisation and autonomy may therefore lead to greater vulnerability. By eschewing collegiality, an individual can be blamed for actions that were in reality taken by a government, or can suffer for events beyond their control. As both Blair and Howard made plain, the buck stops with the prime minister as ‘the ultimate determinant’ (Liaison Committee 2002; Adams 2005).

Michael Foley used the term ‘spatial leadership’ to ‘convey the way in which political authority is protected and cultivated by the creation of a sense of distance, and occasionally detachment, from government’ (2000: 31). It is the most compelling aspect of the presidentialisation thesis. While, as Heffernan (2005a) points out, a prime minister cannot cross the species barrier to become a president – the institutional and formal arrangements remain in place – a prime minister can adopt the style and leadership types displayed by US presidents. Where Foley saw parallels between the British prime ministership and the US presidency, we can follow in looking for aspects of autonomy and personalisation across two prime ministerial systems. Foley saw the expression of spatial
leadership reach ‘an unprecedented level’ under the tenure of Tony Blair:

He equated space with the existence of a functioning nexus linking the leadership with the public’s needs, impulses and values. The public display of such space was a necessary expression of its presence and significance. It also constituted an instrument that provided him both with discretionary licence to exercise leadership and an exterior constituency affording leverage upon party organisations and government institutions.

(2000: 110)

The space that Blair inhabited was derived from the personalised nature of Blair as prime minister and the way he acted as an autonomous leader. This chapter explores these two aspects of ‘spatial leadership’ in relationship to Blair and Howard: the extent to which their premiership can be recognised as personalised and the autonomy that both demonstrated, reaching beyond the executive and party, to speak and relate directly to the electorate. Personalisation, in Blair’s case, was carefully crafted by New Labour strategists, then emphasised in office. Howard’s personalised premiership developed over time and with successive election victories. Enhanced personalisation is to be expected with longer incumbency, but this has been dependent on the influence of other key actors, and here Howard had succeeded in restricting his treasurer’s impact, while Blair remained locked in a fluctuating relationship with his chancellor, more encumbered on the domestic front.

The rhetoric deployed by the two prime ministers gives further evidence of the personalised approach, although it also highlighted their contrasting communication styles. As both leaders presented themselves as crisis leaders, personalisation was heightened: Howard more readily exploited fear through the security agenda; Blair engaged with his domestic critics and took to the international stage with vigour. Blair and Howard both demonstrated ‘strong leadership’, encompassing tough, moralistic, uncompromising stances, particularly on foreign policy. Both leaders became autonomous agents, reaching beyond the executive and party to engage directly with the electorate. Such autonomy was enhanced, as noted earlier, through a reliance on a small group of advisors; being in permanent campaign mode; and a cultivated direct dialogue with the electorate, avoiding mediation through the party, government or usual media outlets. The demise of Blair and Howard