6 Harold Wilson 1974–6: A Presidentializing Premier

There would this time be no ‘presidential nonsense’.¹

He was a consummate politician; and a politician has no business with principles and no business with being frank. Either would interfere with the conduct of his art, which consists not least in appearing to be principled and frank while being neither. Nevertheless Harold Wilson remains un-summarisable.²

In the 1970s Harold Wilson was a less presidential, but not a less presidentializing, premier than he had been in the sixties. But a combination of a more cautious approach on his part and a somewhat dispirited opposition in Whitehall, ensured that on this occasion constitutional controversy was more muted.

If it had been Edward Heath’s intention to restore the cabinet to its traditional place in the prime ministerial advisory system, that intention was frustrated by events and political expectations. The central briefing agency Heath established, ostensibly to bolster the flagging institutions of a collective executive, had, by the time he left No.10, been all but transformed into an additional advisory body underpinning prime ministerial intervention. The presidentialization of the prime ministerial advisory system that had been discernible under Heath’s predecessor, Harold Wilson, had not been reversed under Heath. Heath, however, was the beneficiary of changes introduced by Wilson. Wilson, by introducing alternative advisors into No.10, had prompted the civil service to respond to the prime minister’s demands for more and different kinds of advice. During Heath’s tenure Whitehall sought to regain its former monopoly in these matters by providing the prime minister with a parallel advisory system. The creation of the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), for which Whitehall claimed some share of the credit, can be seen as a limited concession to alternative advice. It was a concession legitimized by being preceded by Parliamentary debate, by the presence of civil servants among its members, and by the fact that it was placed under the Cabinet Secretary.

When Harold Wilson returned to office in 1974 he inherited an

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did not provide more support for the man in No. 10, but, as in 1964, it was advice which was supplied by, or mediated by, Whitehall. Did Harold Wilson still regard the prime ministerial advisory system as unsatisfactory and inadequate? Did advice once again become a political and constitutional issue during Wilson’s last period in office?

Harold Wilson’s return to Downing Street in March 1974 got off to an inauspicious start in respect of the politics of advice. Almost immediately, controversy erupted over Wilson’s preferred advisers and associates. Wilson’s name was mentioned in connection with what came to be known as the ‘landsdeal affair’, involving his onetime office manager, driver and golfing partner, Tony Field, brother of Wilson’s Personal and Political Secretary, Marcia Williams. The ‘landsdeal affair’ inspired much adverse press comment as to the wisdom of Wilson’s choice of advisers. Wilson’s response to his critics was to elevate Mrs Williams to the peerage. This in turn provoked a further round of unsympathetic and unwellcome comment in the media.

Two years later, after Wilson had shocked the nation with his sudden departure from office in March 1976, a further controversy arose about the supposed influence exercised by Marcia Williams, now Lady Falkender. On this occasion it was the former premier’s resignation honours list that became the subject of gossip and criticism. Even before the list was published on 27 May 1976, leaks as to its contents had placed it at the centre of a great deal of media speculation and aroused much adverse comment among the political class. On the 23 May 1976 Tony Benn noted in his diary, ‘the scandal of Harold Wilson’s resignation honours lists is still exercising the press. The whole thing is utterly corrupt.’ Four days later Benn again comments, ‘Harold Wilson’s honours list is still the big news item today. It is unsavoury, disreputable and just told the whole Wilson story in a single episode. That he should pick inadequate, buccaneering, sharp shysters for his honours was disgusting.’

It was not simply that the list reputedly contained the names of cultural lightweights, such as showbusiness tycoons Lew Grade and Bernard Delfont, and television presenter David Frost, and suspect businessmen such as Wilson’s crony and raincoat manufacturer, Sir Joseph Kagan and those lacking socialist credentials such as property millionaire Sir Max Rayne, Wilson’s publisher, Sir George Weidenfeld, and the financier James Goldsmith, that offended ideological purists and the cultural snobbery of the great and the good. It was that the list was rumoured to be the handiwork not of Wilson himself, but of Marcia Williams. George Hutchinson in The Times squarely attributed blame for the honours