In his 2010 autobiography, Tony Blair reflected on the level of public expectation that had accompanied his arrival in office in 1997. He looked back on a force that was both ‘unstoppable’ and yet ‘delusional’. It seemed unreal because it was unreal. It was understandable the people should feel like that; understandable that I should want to lead it; understandable that together we became an unstoppable force. But it was, in a profound way, a deception on both our parts – not a deception knowingly organised or originating from bad faith or bad motives, but one born of the hope that achievement and hard choices could somehow be decoupled. A delusion perhaps describes it better. (Blair, 2010, p. 15)

The mutual delusion described by Blair is not unique to his experience as an incoming prime minister. When voters turn from a long-term incumbent government, they generally move en mass. Two-party Westminster systems allow for persistent political earthquakes every ten to twenty years when the electorate decides that it’s time to move. They thirst for change. They demand reform. They decry old realities and new decays. And as they walk into a polling booth to make their marks on a piece of paper, they do so with an overwhelming sense of expectation that this time things will change.

Once the euphoria subsides, the cynicism unavoidably begins to return, as voters decide that politicians really are ‘all the same’. The same patterns in policy-making are seen to emerge. It begins with an energetic first hundred days of office, consummating the bargain with voters and engendering a honeymoon glow that looks like it will never fade. Within a year, the mistakes begin to emerge: the policy failures,
the ideas abandoned for want of funds, the ministers dismissed for taking their eye off the policy ball. The hope fades. The next election win is delivered without fanfare and without faith by an electorate not yet ready to give the other side another go. The government begins to trade less on its prescriptions for the future and more on its experience. It may no longer be exciting, but at least it’s a ‘safe pair of hands’ in troubled times. Finally, perhaps after another election or perhaps before, the rot completely sets in. The ‘safe pair of hands’ drops the ball so often that the electorate are once again craving something new – someone to tell them that they can legitimately hope that the future can in fact be brighter than they had ever dreamed possible. And so the cycle turns.

Instinctively, we know this pattern to be true. Empirically, it is beyond challenge. So why do voters keep believing that it will be different? Or to use Blair’s words, why are voters periodically convinced that ‘achievement and hard choices’ can in fact be decoupled? This book will search for the answer to that question in the way that prime ministers shape and use political rhetoric. We are familiar with the refrain from voters that ‘we’ve heard it all before’. This book will demonstrate that the reason voters feel like they’ve heard it all before is because in fact they have. There are patterns in the speeches that prime ministers make. Like an old-style jukebox, there are only a certain number of records in the machine. Whilst each new prime minister presents as a fresh DJ with their own ideas, inevitably they will play the same songs in the same order as the last DJ.

‘Good riddance’ is a hit song that stays in the top of the charts for the whole of the first term, explaining that everything was all the fault of the last government. The rousing sounds of ‘all fired up’ accompany us as the government introduces the policies that they claim will re-shape the future. After a term, the music changes. The tone is a little darker. Think ‘long and winding road’ by the Beatles, as the government promises to stay with you for the long haul to see through the policy changes that they have begun. After a second term, they can tell you are starting to lose faith. Two songs appear on permanent rotation – ‘after all that we’ve been through’ reminds you that this government has worked and bled for you and when they were unfaithful they didn’t mean it; and don’t trust the ‘boys of summer’ – those fresh-faced opposition types who can’t possibly love you the way this government does. With the full gamut of musical history to choose from, why do our political leaders keep returning to the same tracks? Don’t they know we’ve heard them before?

In political studies, patterns of behaviour of this kind demonstrate that there are institutional forces at play. There are elements constraining the individual agency of prime ministerial actors in some way so that