

Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture 2013/14



The Educational Indispensability of Political History: British Prime Ministers since 1945

The Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield, FBA.
Attlee Professor of Contemporary
British History, Queen Mary,
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Foreword

Sir John Cass's Foundation is a leading City of London based independent educational charity, which promotes participation and achievement in education. It takes its name from Sir John Cass (1661–1718) who was a City of London politician and philanthropist.

The Foundation not only supports eight educational institutions in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, which bear the name of the Founder, but has also provided substantial assistance to a large number of major educational initiatives in London and further afield.

The Sir John Cass Foundation Lecture is given annually by a high profile policy maker or commentator at the Cass Business School in London and seeks to advance debate about the future of the provision of education in our country.

The inaugural lecture took place in 2007 and given the success of this, and subsequent lectures, has now become an annual event. The Lecture is now published and widely disseminated to educationalists, politicians and other interested parties across the country.

Addresses have been given by Lord Adonis, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Schools in 2007/08; Ed Balls, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2008/09; Michael Gove, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in 2009/10; Dr Anthony Seldon, the Master of Wellington College in 2010/11; Katharine Birbalsingh in 2011/12, the educationalist and former Deputy Head Teacher of St Michael & All Angels Church of England Academy who spoke at the Conservative Party Conference in 2010 and by Dr Vince Cable, the Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills.

This year the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture was delivered by the Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield. It was entitled 'The Educational indispensability of Political History: British Prime Ministers since 1945' and the Foundation is very grateful indeed that it has been given permission to film and to publish the transcript of this year's lecture.

All of Britain's thirteen post-war Prime Ministers were mentioned during either the Lecture or the subsequent question and answer session, with many opinions, as one might imagine, being proffered from the speaker and the audience alike. The Lecture had certainly been eagerly awaited since Baroness Thatcher's funeral in April 2013, given the media's analysis of the contributions made by her, and other individuals who served the Office of Prime Minister.

The Foundation is indebted to all seven speakers and has been delighted by both the quality and content of each lecture that has taken place to date. It has been able to attract quality speakers from across the political spectrum and it is keen to continue to enter into a debate with those in the field of education and to explore meaningful and well thought out programmes that improve the life chances of pupils and students living in London.

These are interesting times in education and Sir John Cass's Foundation will look sympathetically on new projects and ideas for the years ahead and is keen to engage with other high profile speakers so that the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lecture continues to be such a success.

Kevin Everett
Treasurer and Chairman
Sir John Cass's Foundation

The Educational Indispensability of Political History

It is a great pleasure and a true honour to deliver the Sir John Cass Foundation Lecture for 2013. The Foundation has been a good and generous friend to the Mile End Group at my home institution, Queen Mary, and Kevin and the team are always fine and stimulating company on every occasion we meet at the Foundation or down the Mile End Road.

Political education. The indispensability of it is something to which we all subscribe in its non-propagandist form. It is a concept, however, that can carry dark and sinister undertones. For example, just add two letters and you get ‘political re-education’ with all its whiffs of tyranny, ideological excess and even show trials – a version of what that great Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, once described as ‘the subtle terrorism of words’.

But free flowing political education and self-education is part of a necessary and accumulating concept that enriches an open society through soft and tough and normal times alike. It embraces – or should embrace – not just political philosophies, party organisations and their penumbra of think tanks and the great institutions of state but also their hidden wiring; what at first glance can seem boring and often impenetrable processes. Because full political education must impart a sense of system. It must also carry a sense of improvement; of healthy possibility.

All these elements, I’m sure, are very largely self-evident. But I would add another that should be but isn’t always at the front of our collective minds – the quality and clarity of political language. Like others I have a stern but much needed patron saint here called George Orwell.

Orwell ended his short but classic 1946 essay on ‘Politics and the English Language’ with six rules which, if applied, he argued, would mightily improve the resistance of political language to contagion, jargon, staleness and cliché and, indeed, tyranny. They are:

- 1** Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are not used to seeing in print.
- 2** Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3** If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4** Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5** Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6** Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Like everyone else, I transgress the ‘Orwell Rules’ frequently; daily, probably. But, for me, they are the gold standard; the aspiration. How we need a dose of care applied to great swathes of our political exchanges in 2013 and in our political education too.

For me, there is another indispensable ingredient that must fizz away constantly within the swirl of political education and that is a sense of history – how we got to where we are today. And here my deceased patron is John Buchan, statesman and novelist of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* fame. In his memoir, over 70 years ago now, Buchan wrote:

‘In the cycle in which we live we can only see a fraction of the curve’.

The job of the historian and the political educator is to describe that curve as best as he or she can from its beginning to the point it has reached so far. Forecasting and horizon scanning are perilous crafts whether you are a practitioner of politics or an observer of it. The practitioner can take comfort from the words of the great French scientist Louis Pasteur:

‘Chance favours the prepared mind’.

As a historian, I am not a ‘history-repeats-itself’ man. But I am with Mark Twain when he wrote

‘History may not repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes’.

But it’s not just those embraced by my theme this evening – politicians, political educators, political observers and political historians – to whom such thoughts and possibilities and uses of the past matter; it’s all of us as individuals

Penelope Lively captures this marvellously in her new book, *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* which carries the subtitle *A Life in Time*. She writes about

‘the compelling matter of memory – the vapour trail without which we are undone’.

As for my case study this evening – the wider understanding of the UK premiership – the past is a potent shaper of it. Harold Wilson once described the job of Prime Minister as ‘organised by history’. However radical a new arrival in No.10 Downing Street may be, however determined to transform it from ‘a monastery into a powerhouse’, as that same Harold Wilson put it in 1964, there are certain functions that fall to a Prime Minister – things that only he or she can do; jobs that have been acquired in the past and are handed down to each rookie premier. For the more historically minded, the very walls of the building talk – especially in the Cabinet Room.

I have never aspired to the job of British Prime Minister, you will be relieved to hear. If I had and I made it, what shards of the past would cling to the Velcro of my memory as I walked through that world famous door after delivering my well-rehearsed spontaneity on the front step of No.10?

- Of a huge, territorial British Empire acquired and disposed of
- Of Asquith’s Cabinet on the evening of 4 August 1914 waiting for Big Ben to strike 11:00 at which instant Britain’s ultimatum to the Kaiser would expire and we would be at war with Germany.

● Of 28 May 1940 (though this meeting took place in the PM's Room in the House of Commons) when the Labour members of the new Coalition War Cabinet (Clem Attlee and Arthur Greenwood) sided with Winston Churchill against Halifax and Chamberlain who wished to explore what terms the UK might get from Hitler.

● The list of crisis meetings is endless – Suez 1956; The Cuban Missile Crisis 1962; The Falklands 1982; Black Wednesday 1992.

● And it's not just war or near-war discussions that those walls have absorbed – it's the great transformers of society: the decisions of 1945–46 that shaped the National Health Service when it started operating in July 1948; the great privatisations of the Eighties and Nineties.

● And the poignant resignation Cabinets, most famously Lady Thatcher's in 1990.

I've long been intrigued, too, by the outsider version of what the awful fictional Professor Welch in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, described as 'History speaking', each time he picked up the phone. How do we – Queen's subjects, electors, students, teachers – pick up our idea of what the Prime Minister is for; what the job is all about?

I'm a historian. I don't do theories. I leave that to the social scientists. I belong to the Max Bygraves school of 'I wanna tell you a story'. By the way on matters theoretical, a senior military friend of mine recently told me of one of his French counterparts saying

'It may be working in practice. But does it work in theory?'

I digress.

On this question, how we absorb and shape our ideas of what functions PMs are there to perform and the style in which they should conduct themselves, I *do* have a theory. It's this. That we acquire our expectations from the first Prime Minister with whom we were familiar. In my case, it's Harold Macmillan. And ever since, somewhere in my subconscious mind, I've harboured the irrational expectation that all subsequent prime ministers, like Uncle Harold, will be languid, stylish, witty, steeped in the classics and history, dripping with self-irony and prone to ham acting. Naturally I've been disappointed for one reason or another. When I began teaching my 'Cabinet and Premiership' course at Queen Mary in 1992 this was a bit of a problem for my students as the bulk of their images of premiership were drawn from the 11½ years Mrs Thatcher occupied Downing Street and however one looks at her premierships there were more than a few elements of the unusual and the dramatic about them.

Lady Thatcher has been much on our minds this year. I was helping David Dimbleby with the BBC commentary on her funeral from a special studio constructed close to the steps of St. Paul's. I remember two particular thoughts that morning:

- How she changed the jet stream of British politics and political economy.
- How she was now passing into the hands of the historians whom she will mesmerise and fascinate as long as anyone takes an interest in the British premiership, our politics and our government. In other words, she has and will hold a prime position in political education. Everyone who lived through the Thatcher years has a certain idea of her and her 'ism' and very few were neutral about her.

Prime ministers have long been the cynosure – the centre of attention – in British political and public life. But, with the coming of electronic news-gathering and the 24-hour media cycle during her years in No.10, she became the most intensely covered of all our PMs up to that time and the pressures of the spotlight on her successors has not eased.

And yet how much do we know about them – their inner selves; what Lytton Strachey in his great biography of Queen Victoria called ‘the secret chambers of consciousness’? How much even do we know about what being Prime Minister entails?

Earlier this month, I asked David Cameron what it was that outsiders failed to appreciate about the job of Prime Minister. This is what he said:

‘I think they are pretty understanding. I think the public have a pretty understanding view that it is a high pressure job. In the end you’re responsible for everything. What would they be surprised about? I suppose if 10 members of the public came in and followed you around for a week, what would surprise them? I suppose the quantity of foreign policy meetings. I mean the amount of telephone calls, one-to-one meetings... Sometimes we analyse my diary. And we go “Right, how much time is he spending talking to Presidents and Prime Ministers?” And it is a very large quantity. I think that would probably surprise people’.

Later in the conversation Mr Cameron came back to this theme when we were talking about national security, intelligence and terrorism.

‘I knew that the national security, terrorism, intelligence services role of the job was very big. But it still surprises you how big it is’.

Even though the Foreign, Home and Northern Ireland secretaries carry a good deal of the load, he continued: ‘Nonetheless, even though they are doing the day-to-day, it still comes back on to the Prime Minister’.

In my view, possessing a pretty good idea of the job of Prime Minister is an essential ingredient in political knowledge and education. Over the years I’ve had a stab at undertaking a functional analysis and the most recent taxonomy – a copy of which you have that also contains earlier cartography – I compiled in partnership with my friend and colleague, Dr Andrew Blick. Don’t read through it all now. But may I take you through the themes that emerge?

First, the genesis of the first taxonomy of functions in 1947

It was a piece of paper that was de-classified in 1988 at the National Archives, and a friend of mine at the National Archives materialised in the way the archivists do, said you might want to read CAB 21 series first right through and make it disappear it again. The CAB 21 series, some of you know this as you worked on it, is the dustbin category of the Cabinet Office, they put things there where they don't really know where to put them anywhere else, like...

1 How to do a war cabinet for World War 3.

That's a cheerful one, I can tell you...

2 What do you do if the Queen dies, heaven forbid.

The drills for that...

Or anything to do with British Constitution which they have always had real problems with actually, as everybody does. I love the British Constitution being unwritten or still largely unwritten. It means that we historians can do it rather than the lawyers, another trade union point. But wouldn't it be dreadful if it was written down... ghastly... instead of making it up as we go along and calling it being flexible, as one Cabinet Secretary put it to my students in a particularly unforgettable moment.

Well anyway, there was a list of Prime Minister's Functions in there, and it was going to be put in something called the Precedent Book which was then a new idea in the Cabinet Office. I have got a PQ now to get the Precedent Book de-classified. We had some from the 50s, but this is where the constitution lives. The trouble is it is interspersed with case studies of people doing really rather odd things and even dodgy things, I think, so winnowing out the hot stuff from the tedious stuff, is the problem, I think, and why it is taking a long time. But I am after the Precedent Book you know. It is very funny in my time of life the things that excite you; but one day it's like Noel Coward, 'One Day I'll Find You', and get the Precedent Book.

I was alerted to this existence of the Precedent Book by this file, and the reason this file was created, not because it was the first Labour Government with the big majority doing adventurous and big interventions. It has never been shown to a Prime Minister, as far as I can see. And it hasn't been done since and it hadn't been done before. It was produced because of nerdy people like me when the Institute of Public Administration asked the Treasury's Machinery of Government Division for help with the paper they were going to do in Switzerland, to compare with the British Chief Executive, the Prime Minister, with the fourth French Republic President and the United States President; and they didn't know how to do it. So a young man called William Armstrong who went on to head the Civil Service, who had just been in the Cabinet Secretary's Private Office, got permission to do it. He wrote down what he thought the Prime Minister was for as Head of Government not leader of party and sent it round to the Cabinet Secretary, the Permanent Secretary, to the Treasury and the King's Private Secretary and they all fiddled with it, because of one of the great virtues of not having a political politicised Civil Service, they have a passion for accuracy and they couldn't bear it unless they tweaked it a bit ...

The mid-1990s cunning plan of Baldrickian proportions

This gave me a cunning plan of Baldrickian proportions in the 1990s, because I thought I could do an update on William Armstrong's functions and I sent it to the same people, you see – and they couldn't help themselves. I am not going to go through it all, but I give you the 1947 list because this was the first time that anybody officially has ever worked out, inside the Cabinet Office, what the Prime Minister is for. There were only twelve functions then, but I would have added some more, but was only three weeks old at the time and precocious though I was, it was too early.

Managing the relationship between the Monarch and Government as a whole

Now this is a classic Walpole function. The first Prime Minister, managing the King's business in Parliament, Parliament's business with the King. Now Walpole always denied that he was Prime Minister, because it was a French thing; 'Premier Ministre' and therefore offensive, just as Tony Blair was not wildly keen on being called President. Walpole certainly couldn't stand being called Prime Minister and it was used as a term of abuse. Isn't it funny how we domesticate things? This is still a prime ministerial function. And this evening, if the Queen is in town, I think she is, and the Prime Minister certainly is, they would have met for about an hour, 5 to 6 – something like that; and David Cameron said during that same interview it is very good for me, it makes me marshal my thoughts. And Prime Ministers are very discreet about this. Harold Wilson used to say with his fabulous touch of his self-irony, that it's the meeting I most enjoy in the week as it never leaks and she is only the person I meet who is not after my job.

Hiring and firing Ministers was the next one. That was only established in the early 20th Century. The Conservative Party was having a breakdown then about Free Trade and Protection. Europe is the same thing really, and it's never been able to handle it and its nervous system goes very funny periodically. And Arthur Balfour, who was witty, clever and acid, sacked two from each side to encourage the others and those of you remember the 90s, will remember that does not work, and it didn't; but only then did Arthur Balfour establish this as a Prime Minister's absolute power. I love Arthur Balfour. I have been reading, re-reading Churchill's World Crisis Volume One because of the build-up to the Great War, when Churchill was the First Lord of the Admiralty. He wrote three volumes called that, and Arthur Balfour said Winston is wonderful. He writes the same autobiography and always calls it the World Crisis. Wonderful reading, wonderful reading ...

Chairing the Cabinet and its most important committees, third

Fourth, arranging other Cabinet business, the Chairmanships of other Committees, their Memberships and Agendas

because you cannot do everything.

Fifth, overall control of the Civil Service as First Lord of the Treasury

Sixth, the allocation of functions between departments, their creation and abolition

Unless it is a statute that created a department like the Ministry of Defence Act 1946, you can do it using the Royal Prerogative and Prime Ministers, well some, glad to say not this one, have been tempted when everything else is going wrong to show that they can at least do something within their own bailiwick. The re-naming of departments and the re-jigging of it all, and the furniture flies from one end of Whitehall to another. The name change makes no difference for those involved at all, it adds to the aggro; so any of you younger ones who want to be Prime Minister, before doing that ring me up and I'll talk you out of it...

Seventh, relationships with other Heads of Government

Meetings were not called summits then. Mr Churchill invented the concept of the Summit in the 1950 General Election, calling for a Summit before the Cold War got out of hand and ended up in an Atomic War.

Eighth, an especially close involvement in foreign policy and defence matters

There was a time when I had to explain that to the students, but sadly I haven't had to in recent years.

Ninth, top Civil Service appointments

Number ten is one of my favourites, top appointments to many institutions of a national character

So much nicer than Quango – Tasteful.

Eleventh, certain scholastic and ecclesiastical appointments

That has always bothered the foreigners when they know about it, because until Gordon Brown, without consulting my Anglican friends, said you just decide. I act as a postman to the Queen. The Bishops – the Boss Class of the Anglican Church which I adore, albeit from the outside, was decided by the Head of perhaps the fourth nastiest profession in the world. I love politicians and they are indispensable but it's not a nice profession and the one that

rises to the top of it, gets to choose the Boss Class, or did, the Anglican Church, which when you come to think about it, it was amazing ... really ... Quite often the prime ministers weren't Anglicans. Some interfered and it always leaked because a friend of mine, who used to do that job in Number 10, once said: the Anglicans are such dears, but they had their own definition of confidentiality, which is, you only tell only one person at a time. So it always leaked. There was a story, I forget where I got it now, but it was one of the early G7s and it was in London and it was when Jim Callaghan was Prime Minister and there was room for only one delegation in Number 10 to have their forward office and that was Jimmy Carter's obviously, President of the United States. He got the Appointment's Secretary's room(or Heaven's Talent Scout, as the job used to be known). Towards the end of the first morning, our Cabinet Secretary, John Hunt, asked Brezezinski, the President's National Security Advisor, how do you like the room? He said terrific, lovely atmosphere, but what is that map on the wall with those pins in. Is it nuclear missiles, civil defence dumps or oil storage, what is it? It is the Bishop of the Deans, that are coming up, he was told, and Brezezinski could not comprehend, that this was the British system. There are certain academic appointments too; Oxford was given the Regius Professorships to do on its own. I think by John Major, if I remember and Cambridge, as much the same, so it has changed a bit. But the twelfth one, which the students always find immensely boring, is **the handling of precedent and procedure**. I always feel like that remarkable man David Bellamy, you know the naturalist when explaining this one. You remember Bellamy? He used to come out of some swamp dripping with ordure and say this might look like mud to you, but there is life in here. Do you remember at the camera? Wonderful. This is the David Bellamy clause because if you have a largely unwritten constitution that relies on custom and practice and precedent as much as statute, that's what it is. The precedent and procedure is the British Constitution and if the person who decides what the re-tweaking of the precedent of procedure in a particular eventuality should be, and he or she is the Prime Minister, it is very dodgy. In the City it would be called insider trading. It would be like my students marking and

setting their own exams. But, because it is Britain, we don't seem to notice. I always thought that was very odd. There is, much, much, more constraint now on it; much more of the constitution is on the face of a statute or the back of a code so that has changed.

But I won't go through the mid 90s list of Prime Ministerial functions now, except to point out the big change, the really big change, as it is self-evident. The nuclear weapons responsibility which they didn't have in 1947. Attlee had a Cabinet Committee that decided that we have a bomb, but the first Prime Minister to have one was the Winston Churchill, and the first one to have a real nuclear force was Harold Macmillan. But the Prime Minister is the only one who can authorise nuclear retaliation and there are always two or three Deputies, in case they are wiped out by the bolt from the blue or under sedation. I don't mean that in a funny way, but I mean in hospital. Only the Prime Minister can do that and that this is an awesome responsibility.

I think that's when you know you're Prime Minister, on day one, or perhaps day two the Chief of Defence Staff briefs you and tells you where the Trident boat roughly is in the North Atlantic and what it can do in half an hour, which is terrifying enough and then warns you that in the next couple of weeks you will have to write your wishes from beyond the grave in the 'last resort' letters. The last resort letters you can either write your own, or they are formatted. The choices are retaliate, or don't retaliate, and if don't retaliate, do the following things.

I think it used to have an extra option – the Captain of the boat to decide, which the Navy always hated ... signing those letters – that is when you know you're Prime Minister because nothing can prepare you for that. The letters go into four envelopes which nobody else sees; they are sealed, put in the inner safe of each of the four Trident boats only to be opened when you know that Britain isn't there anymore. Of which there are several tests, one of which is the "Today Programme" allowing for Sundays. I am not making this up. I think it's a great thing, the Today Programme and when I first told them that they were central to the last line of the British Defence and they thought I was making it up. Indeed I wasn't.

In fact the one declassified file, I still can't believe was the retaliation file from the early 60s. The Joint Intelligence Committee had warned that low trajectory missiles from the East Germany and the Russian missiles from boats in the North Sea could hit the V Bomber bases in less than four minutes which was the warning time. So you had to get the V Bombers configured so they could take off in one and a half minutes, but the problem was the Prime Minister. The problem with the Prime Minister out of town, in a period of tension, or not even a period of tension, and suddenly it blows up. The Treasury didn't want to spend any money, and Mr Macmillan didn't want any fuss; so they compromised and got the AA put in a phone in the Prime Minister's car, which they used to communicate with the blokes on the motorbikes (they had no car phones in those days). This thing would go off and the Prime Minister would go into the nearest call box. Think of the cost of being a nuclear power, the drills you had to go through and the airfields and aircraft. The file contains exchanges from the Minister of Works' Private Secretary in the Spring of 62, just in time for Cuba (which was thoughtful) to the Principal Private Secretary of Number 10, saying that the three cars have been fitted, Pye's of Cambridge will service them once a month and we test them once a month, but you might want to make sure that your drivers always carry four pennies, (this is for you younger ones – you won't get this, because to make the phone to work in those days, you had to press button A and you couldn't do that unless you had four old pennies), because I'd hate; for the last four minutes of life to be spent by the Prime Minister trying to find an agreeable bus conductor to give him sufficient change. I am not making this up But Number 10 very polished, always said we are well aware of this, and aware that when out motoring one can be caught penniless but there is a new thing called subscriber trunk dialling. The Prime Minister can dial 100 and reverse the charges, but we are taking up the precaution of taking up membership with AA and RAC which will give us access to their boxes all over the country.

Can you imagine it, I digress. But the nuclear responsibilities are awesome.

The current, Coalition-influenced cartography

In the latest list of Prime Minister's Functions there is much to do with coalition, the psycho drama of coalition. On some of the minister's appointments and Lib Dem ones Clegg has a say – who is Attorney General, for example. There is also a large chunk now on the National Security side with the new National Security Council, which is very interesting innovation. It is the old Committee of Imperial Defence with better I.T.; but we couldn't call it that really these days, really, could we? These attempts to do the functional analysis of the job of Prime Minister are attempts to bring a little bit of precision to this otherwise very squishy debate about relative powers of Cabinet and Prime Ministers.

What do these taxonomies tell us?

- The expansion of the PM's range and remit since 1947.
- The accretion of functions is markedly one way.
- The defence of the realm is a constant – as David Cameron emphasised in the conversation from which I quoted earlier. Could this be coupled, too, with what Douglas Hurd calls 'our instinct to intervene'?
- The very special nuclear functions.
- The evermore relentless media and communications demands.
- The PM as keeper of the Government's strategy.
- The ever lurking debate on individual prime ministerial power versus collective Cabinet government.

On this last theme, the Press, to my surprise, has not picked up on a really interesting section of Jack Straw's memoirs, *Last Man Standing*, published last year. In it, Jack criticises himself and Tony Blair for the style of decision-taking on much – though not all – of the road to war in Iraq. 'Tony's reputation', Jack writes,

'has suffered because he used informal "sofa government" methods of decision-making, rather than ensuring that Cabinet (and its committees) were proper, formal bodies where collective decisions were made. The criticism is justified. Look at Iraq.'

'I was fully involved', Jack continues

'in the decisions over Iraq, made informally and formally. Because Tony had agreed that any decision to take military action would have to go through the Commons, there had to be a high degree of involvement by Cabinet (and the Parliamentary Labour Party) in the final decision. The end point of this discussion chain was very formal indeed – a resolution of the House of Commons. But it would have been far better – for Tony and his reputation, as well as for good government – if he, and I [Jack was Foreign Secretary at the time], and the Defence Secretary, had had to discuss progress with, and seek decisions from, a National Security Council, in turn reporting to Cabinet – and on paper, not by way of oral briefing'.

Jack has reached the conclusion that: 'The days of self-regulation of Cabinet Government should be over'. And he's drafting a Bill for that purpose (and I must declare an interest – I'm helping him a bit with this). This is how Jack describes its prospective ingredients in his memoirs:

'I believe, therefore, that there must be a Cabinet Government Act. This would prescribe the duties of the prime minister and the Chancellor, and the role of Cabinet; provide for a National Security Council, whose approval would be needed for national security and Budget and public spending decisions respectively; and require the Cabinet Secretary to report to Parliament each year as to whether Cabinet Government was operating effectively'.

Jack Straw's thinking is both intrinsically interesting on the functional aspects of government at the very centre but it's also revealing about the potency of human factors and temperaments in such matters. This is why political education if it is to be both mature and fully-embracing of reality must include both a rich slice of political history and political biography. Temperament, purpose and circumstances all matter. Fortunate are the Prime Ministers, as Douglas Hurd observed of Robert Peel and the Corn Laws, who want to do what most needs to be done.

Some want to be transformers and prove to be so. Others wish to be – but a combination of their own failings and unfavourable circumstances prevent them. That is the subject for another lecture, but in my book on The Prime Minister (*The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders since 1945*) over 10 years ago now, I drew up certain criteria of assessment which I think hold good today and which, I think, are necessary – returning to our theme of political education – when we as individual observer-electors come to rate the performance of those the electorate has set in authority over us as prime minister. I placed them in five categories.

Here they are:

1: Backdrop to the Premiership

- Condition of the economy and society.
- The Parliamentary arithmetic in terms of seats in the House of Commons
- Internal condition of the premier's party.
- Now I would have to add to my original list – condition of the Coalition.
- Disposition of the media towards the premier, his/her government/coalition and his/her party.

2: Management Capacity

- Premier's skills at managing the status quo (i.e. the prosaic but necessary continuing functions of central government).
- Handling crises (including the media aspects of crisis management).

3: Insight and Perception

- Personal (including self-awareness).
- Political (sensitivity towards colleagues, officials and party).
- Policy (a capacity to see beyond the shibboleths of established or manifesto positions).

4: Changes and Innovation

- Planned.
- Improvised.
- Contingent upon unforeseen events.

5: Constitutional and Procedural

- The running of No.10 Downing Street and the balance within it between the political advisors and the administrative officials.
- The handling of Cabinet and the apparatus of collegiality (and now, the emotional geography of coalition).
- Managing Whitehall and the career Civil Service.
- The personal handling of the House of Commons; the care and attention paid to the institution of Parliament and the management of his/her party in both Commons and Lords.
- The probity and decency of the system (i.e. the Prime Minister as manager of the Ministerial and Civil Service codes and now the statutes which underpin several of their elements).

What a desperately stretching and difficult business the job of being British Prime Minister is. It's terribly, if not uniquely vulnerable, to Enoch Powell's famous dictum that:

'All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs'.

In terms of the British premiership, the purpose of political education is to add to our individual tendencies to bring praise but more often to heap blame, a capacity to understand and explain the astonishing range of ingredients and factors which shape the job and its holders – and to alert those who might wish to be Prime Minister one day to what they will be letting themselves in for.

Thank you so much for having me with you this evening.

Sir John Cass's Foundation

Established in 1748, and now a major independent educational charity benefiting the whole of London, the Foundation takes its name from its founder, Sir John Cass. Born in 1661, he served as Alderman, Sheriff and MP for the City of London and was knighted in 1712.

Today the Foundation has links in the nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of education, supporting its primary and secondary schools in London, (both rated as Outstanding by OFSTED), as well as the Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design within London Metropolitan University and the Cass Student Halls of Residence in Hackney, which provides good quality, low cost accommodation for students in London and beyond.

It is now over ten years since the Foundation made a multi-million pound grant to City University's Business School, which was subsequently re-named the Cass Business School, and continues to provide on-going support, to this and seven other establishments, bearing the name of the founder.

A substantial grant was awarded to the University of East London towards a new state-of-the-art teaching and research centre which opened in 2009 and was named the Sir John Cass School of Education and Communities. This is already one of London's foremost centres for teacher training, and importantly in terms of outcomes, many of its alumni are working in local schools.

More recently the Foundation agreed to boost its support to needy individuals and announced a five year £1.5m programme entitled the Sir John Cass's Foundation Lord Mayor's Scholarships Programme. This is an initiative with the Office of the Lord Mayor of the City of London and the third year commenced in the 2013/14 academic year.

During the year support has been given to Charterhouse in London towards the creation of a dedicated learning and resource centre. This initiative between Charterhouse and the Foundation will provide much needed access to this historic site for students in London and beyond.

Additional support has been provided to the London College of Fashion towards the women's prisoner education programme at HMP Send (Big Society Award Winner 2014) and the creation of a Social Enterprise at HMP Holloway.

A new partnership has also been forged between the Foundation and the Baker Dearing Trust, in support of the advancement of technical education, and the creation of University Technical Colleges; and lastly support has also been provided to the Share Foundation to augment Government support for Looked After Children; one of the most disadvantaged groups in society, by investing funds for these needy individuals in Junior ISAs.

For further information please visit: www.sirjohncass.org