Evaluating British Prime Ministerial Performance: David Cameron in Political Time

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Introduction

Assessments of prime ministerial performance are ubiquitous in contemporary UK politics. Print, broadcast and increasingly social media provide a running commentary (see for example, Blair 2007). Opinion polls routinely collect popular assessments of prime ministers while the ascendancy of ‘valence politics’ means such evaluations are increasingly salient to electoral choice (Clarke et al. 2009; Whiteley et al. 2013). Biographers find evaluation of prime ministerial performance an irresistible enterprise (Marquand 2011). But all too often such assessments of performance are idiosyncratic. Where evaluation employs any criteria, these are typically implicit and adrift of any underpinning theoretical framework. Comparisons, where offered, tend toward the casual rather than the systematic.

This paper makes an early contribution to what will doubtless become a substantial literature evaluating David Cameron's premiership. Its broader contribution is towards the development of theoretically informed but empirically grounded assessments of performance which are explicitly attentive to the structural conditions in which UK prime ministers exercise their agency. The paper begins by reviewing existing models for evaluating the performance of UK prime ministers, principally those based on the approaches of Greenstein (2001) and Bulpitt (1986). The case is then made for an alternative framework which applies to the UK and then, in one of the paper’s original contributions, significantly develops Stephen Skowronek’s historical institutionalist analysis of the US presidency. After outlining the modifications necessary to Skowronek's approach, Cameron is identified as a disjunctive prime minister. On the basis of an analysis of the premierships of Edward Heath (1970-74), Harold Wilson (1974-76) and James Callaghan (1976-79) we then identify the
warrants to authority, the strategies and dilemmas associated with disjunctive leadership in the UK. This allows us, in a further original contribution, to identify and apply criteria for the systematic and comparative evaluation of David Cameron's 2005-10 premiership. The paper concludes by considering Cameron's position in 'political time' and the challenges presented by a second term in office.

**Models of Prime Ministerial Performance**

It is easier to ask than to answer the question, what makes for prime ministerial success or failure in Number 10 Downing Street. Beyond the rankings provided in expert surveys (see for example Theakston & Gill 2006), the existing literature offers two main options which seek to conceptualise, interpret and evaluate prime ministerial performance in Britain: analysis of prime ministers’ leadership skills and style or their statecraft. Derived from Greenstein’s (2001) approach to assessing US presidents, the leadership style/skills model focuses on the performance of prime ministers in relation to: public communication; organisational capacity; political skills; policy vision; cognitive style (how they process advice and take decisions); and emotional intelligence (see Theakston 2007; 2011; 2012). In contrast, the statecraft model focuses on how British political leaders secure office and power through party management, winning the battle of ideas (‘political argument hegemony’), developing a successful electoral strategy, and demonstrating ‘governing competence’ (Bulpitt 1986; Buller & James 2012).

In aiming to make sense of the leadership roles and tasks prime ministers undertake, analyse how they conduct them, and assess how effectively they perform them, both models help advance the debate from recurrent questions about prime ministerial power (or
‘predominance’ in contemporary formulations) and arguments about more systemic labels or trends (e.g. ‘presidentialisation’). The difficulty both models share is taking into account the context and the wider environment in which leaders operate, and the opportunities, challenges and constraints they face. The nexus between the personal qualities of leaders and the demands of the times is central to their effectiveness, as Greenstein has conceded.

Perhaps some of the qualities or skills he noted are more important in some situations than others. ‘The capacity of the president to make a difference is a function not only of his personal attributes, but also the political environment in which they are brought to bear. A president who is well suited to serve in one setting may be ill suited for another’ (Greenstein 2005 quoted in Theakston 2007, p.60). But Greenstein does not develop this aspect of the model in any detailed or extended way.

The statecraft model goes further in incorporating several aspects of structural context into leadership evaluation (Buller & James 2012), including the electoral constraint faced by parties and politicians, public attitudes towards policies, the international situation and the relationship between foreign and domestic policy and politics, and pre-eminently economic factors. Buller and James have recently sought to strengthen the statecraft model's engagement with this structural context. The relationship between the ‘objectives . . . ideas and preferences’ of leaders and their structural context is vital they suggest, even if the demands or difficulties of varying contexts cannot be weighted, graded or ranked in a quantitative sense. The structural contexts of prime ministerial action are also dynamic. A prime minister will find a stable and predictable structural context easier to govern within than one that changes suddenly, unexpectedly or dramatically. But Buller and James have yet to provide an overall analytical framework that can be used systematically to make sense of the relationship between leaders and their contexts, compare different prime ministers and
contexts, or understand and explain patterns of change over time (Buller & James 2015, pp.80-83). The argument of this paper is that a historical institutionalist account, such as that offered by Skowronek, permits incorporation of ‘the changing universe of political action’ (Skowronek 2011, p.77) in a fashion that these other models do not presently allow. In contrast to Greenstein, Skowronek (1993, p.19) rejects a focus on the characters and political skills of leaders, arguing that they have almost nothing to do with success or failure in office, and tell us little about the political impact of presidential leadership. Equally, he conceives of the leadership ‘test’ in a broader and more demanding way than the statecraft model’s primary focus on ‘how many elections [leaders] win’ (Buller & James 2015, p.79).

Skowronek’s (1993) theory of US presidential leadership in the context of political time and regime cycles provides a way of understanding the dynamic inter-relationship of structure and agency in analysing, comparing and explaining leadership performance and success that can be broadly applied to other political systems (Laing & McCaffrie 2013; McCaffrie 2012). The challenges and opportunities that presidents face, and the scope and authority they have, according to Skowronek, essentially depend on whether they are opposed to or affiliated with the prevailing ‘regime’ (understood as a set of ideas, values, policy paradigms and programmes, and the associated pattern of political interests and institutional supports), and the extent to which that ‘regime’ is itself resilient or vulnerable (table 1).

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**Table 1. Skowronek’s typology of leaders, regimes and patterns of politics**
Put briefly, political time involves cycles of regime maintenance, decay and challenge, crisis, replacement and rebuilding as problems emerge and are confronted, policies evolved, and political support and authority accumulated or lost. Different tests or challenges are posed for leaders depending on their stance towards the regime and their place in the cycle of political time (Skowronek 1993; see also ’t Hart 2014b, pp.112-118). Leaders who enter office supporting an existing regime which is working well and is widely supported (leaders of articulation), can be expected to operate within and manage the existing policy framework. At most they are ‘orthodox innovators’ rather than attempting radical or fundamental reforms. The ambitions and plans of pre-emptive leaders – who repudiate an existing regime and seek to replace it – are, however, ultimately frustrated and blocked by the continuing strength and popularity of a resilient political order. Disjunctive leaders face the challenge of trying to prop up or rescue a failing regime, at best buying time and keeping the show on the road in the face of mounting problems, policy failures and diminishing support and authority. Exploiting the opportunities created by the breakdown and failure of vulnerable regimes, reconstructive leaders are able to develop and put in place new policy frameworks, and assemble new coalitions of support around a new regime or political order.

**Applying Skowronek to British Prime Ministers**

Laing and McCaffrie (2013) have applied Skowronek’s model to the Australian premiership and identified its potential to analyse prime ministerial leadership elsewhere. As they acknowledge, however, there are constitutional, institutional and political differences between the US presidential and Westminster systems that demand recognition when
transplanting Skowronek’s model (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, pp.84-89; Heffernan 2005).

These differences are well understood and do not need detailing extensively here. The assumptions, practices and processes of collective (Cabinet) government constrain even dominant prime ministers in a way that deprives them of the sort of authority a US president can claim or assert. Prime ministers can sometimes lead from the front, but also have to routinely consult, broker, bargain, and compromise within the executive. ‘Prime ministers never have an absolute monopoly on authority to shatter the political order and create a new one the way some presidents have had’, meaning that Westminster-type systems may provide ‘less pure examples of prime ministers standing in opposition to the political orthodoxy as either reconstructors or pre-emptors’ (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, p.85). Conversely, a fusion of powers and disciplined parties can grant prime ministers a dominance over the legislature that a president would envy. Even disjunctive prime ministers facing backbench dissent will still get most of their major legislation through parliament (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, p.87).

Prime ministers can face more of a challenge from an organised and institutionalised opposition that can enjoy more authority and legitimacy than the forces ranged against a US president. The stance and behaviour of Opposition parties can contribute to the success of reconstructive prime ministers (McCaffrie 2013), whether through strengthening the arm of government by their own ineptitude, internal divisions and ineffectiveness, or by acceptance of the new agenda and accommodation to the new policy framework, eventually consolidating reconstructive leaders’ legacies when the electoral wheel turns again putting the Opposition back into office. Certainly we can envisage that an orthodox innovator prime minister is likely to face a different challenge to their authority from a pre-emptive Opposition leader than that posed by an Opposition leader in the same orthodox innovator mode. A disjunctive prime minister facing an effective insurgent Opposition leader with a
reconstruction agenda will find their room for manoeuvre and options shrink further. For those who become prime minister after a period leading the Opposition, it is also possible that the transition experience, and the commitments made and pressures faced during it, may affect or constrain their premiership in ways that a president may not encounter, particularly if circumstances change radically (perhaps increasing the vulnerability of the regime) during that period of time.

Compared to the presidential system, political parties are a more important component of a prime minister’s authority (Heppell 2013b). In particular, a prime minister enjoys less security of tenure than a president. Failing prime ministers are vulnerable to removal by parties nervous about electoral defeat. The security of tenure of presidents, even when experiencing ‘prolonged and dramatic failures’, may mean therefore that the US provides ‘clearer examples of disjunctive leadership’ (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, p.88). Able to continue in office without term limits as long as their parties and the electorate will support them, long-serving prime ministers may also find political time changing around them. As new circumstances and events affect the viability of the existing regime, the leadership challenge they face may alter, so that they move from one of Skowronek’s leadership types to another (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, pp.88-89, 98). Furthermore, only one president (Cleveland) has served two non-consecutive terms (Skowronek 1993, pp.48-49) but this pattern has been more common in Britain (for instance MacDonald, Baldwin, Churchill and Wilson in the twentieth century), again with possible consequences for a prime minister’s place in political time.

Skowronek’s conception of political time has been criticised as being a domestic one and not taking account of international events, pressures and constraints. The cycles of party politics
are not a closed system (Magliocca 2009). Any account of political regimes in British politics – or ‘orders and eras’ (Studlar 2007) – has to recognise the major impact of external events and forces (economic and political, and in the case of the European Union, institutional) on the problems faced by governments and leaders and on their scope for effective action and response (see also Bulpitt 1988). In other words, regime resilience or vulnerability is not simply a matter of domestic political and economic interests, actions and pressures but is affected by transnational and international actors, structures and forces. Equally, a leader’s orientation may differ across domains – perhaps being, for example, ‘affiliated’ in terms of domestic policies but with ‘reconstructive’ aims in relation to foreign affairs, complicating Skowronek’s classificatory scheme (Magliocca 2009).

**Classifying David Cameron’s Premiership**

Having established that Skowronek’s model can be employed in the British context, we now turn to identifying David Cameron’s position in political time. To do so, we need to answer two questions. Firstly, has Cameron encountered a vulnerable or resilient regime? Secondly, is Cameron an opponent or affiliate of the established regime?

**Regime vulnerability or resilience?**

The question of regime vulnerability or resilience is a difficult one to resolve. Firstly, Skowronek delivers retrospective verdicts. Contemporaneous assessments, as in the present case, pose a greater challenge. Signals of regime difficulties which appear clear after the event are often ambiguous at the time (see for example, Hindmoor & McConnell 2013). Secondly, Skowronek’s notion of regime vulnerability is poorly operationalised (‘t Hart
Regime vulnerability is a relatively undifferentiated phenomenon in Skowronek’s account. Yet it may present itself in various ways. Deep vulnerabilities may be evident across a narrow range of commitments. Alternatively, regime vulnerability may be shallower but evident across many governing commitments. Skowronek also fails to provide any criteria to identify the symptoms of regime vulnerability. The few attempts to apply the framework of regimes to British politics provide limited assistance since they focus primarily upon those factors associated with the emergence of new regimes rather than on signals of an existing regime’s vulnerability (Studlar 2007). While tempting, it is also challenging to construct a definitive checklist of indicators of regime vulnerability. Each regime embodies different commitments. Vulnerabilities will manifest themselves in a variety of ways. The selection of indicators to ‘measure’ regime vulnerability is far from straightforward. For example, historic poll data would reveal that Margaret Thatcher, a reconstructive prime minister, recorded much worse poll ratings than her disjunctive counterparts. However, such difficulties should equally not prevent us from identifying aspects of the ideational, policy, political and institutional environment which deserve scrutiny when assessing regime vulnerability. So, while some regard “public opinion as too fickle, shallow and sporadic to provide reliable measurements of political time” (Price 2002, pp.613-4) changes in public attitudes towards the regime or the emergence of popular protests may demonstrate regime vulnerability. Following Crockett (Crockett 2009, p.8), electoral outcomes, particularly deviating and disaligning elections, may be an important signal. The decay of a previously dominant policy agenda and emergence of new issues and concerns could indicate challenges to existing governing commitments. Finally, an outpouring of books and articles from the ‘commentariat’ which question the viability of the status-quo and the established ways of doing things would seem a plausible indicator of regime vulnerability.
Mindful of such environmental features, our assessment is that Cameron encountered a governing regime more vulnerable than any time since the early 1980s. Central to this vulnerability were the effects of the 2007-8 financial crisis. The recession proved longer than any since the Great Depression. Living standards only slowly recovered and coincided, in Cameron’s first term, with an ongoing European sovereign debt crisis. Continuing misconduct, including Libor rate manipulation and assisting tax evasion, diminished faith in financial institutions. Tax avoidance by major multi-nationals also generated public dismay and political controversy. These political-economic regime vulnerabilities ran in parallel with the malaise of other institutions. A perception of disconnection between elites and those they serve was abroad. Surveys demonstrated widespread distrust of politicians (see for example, Phillips & Simpson 2015). The disaffection with the two major parties evident at the 2010 election quickly engulfed the Liberal Democrats shortly thereafter. That the SNP and UKIP were the principal beneficiaries placed further strains on the regime. The SNP's rise and the 2014 independence referendum strained the UK's territorial integrity. UKIP's success testified to a constituency of disaffected voters 'left behind' by recent governments. But it also manifested and mobilised a growing disaffection towards the EU and immigration into the UK. Indeed, Britain's commitments beyond its borders were under broader question. Defence cuts and the legacies of Afghanistan and Iraq raised doubts about Britain's ability and willingness to intervene abroad. Faith in institutions mediating state-society relations also diminished (figure 1). The phone-hacking scandal and Leveson Inquiry laid bare the absence of ethical and political constraint upon the print media. The scandal also implicated the Metropolitan police and formed one of a series of episodes including the 2011 riots, the
activities of undercover officers in protest groups, ‘Plebgate’, the report of Hillsborough Independent Panel and the handling of child sexual abuse cases that cast doubt on the ethics and competence of several police forces. To employ Hay’s formulation the period was one of pathology without crisis (Hay 2013). Cameron's first term saw an accumulation of pathologies across a wide range of institutions and regime commitments.

**Cameron: opponent or affiliate of the regime?**

There is no direct UK equivalent of the inaugural addresses that Skowronek relies upon to identify presidential stances towards the regime. Our analysis here draws instead upon a systematic review of all the speeches which David Cameron delivered as Leader of the Opposition. This reveals that Cameron struck an equivocal position towards the existing regime, like many previous occupants of that role. This was due to the shifting political fortunes of Labour in office and the consequences that followed for the Conservatives' own electoral strategies. Cameron made a determined effort between becoming Conservative leader and Blair’s resignation to present himself as the ‘heir to Blair’ (Pierce 2005). Cameron criticised Labour under Blair on the grounds that it had ‘dumbed down’ the education system, demoralised NHS workers, transferred powers to the EU without sufficient democratic warrant and disengaged voters by endless media ‘spin’, but there were also conciliatory words towards the Labour leader in relation to improvements to public service standards, the minimum wage and the operational independence granted to the Bank of England.

Furthermore, Cameron's rhetoric borrowed heavily from Blairite conceptions of a globalised world. This encompassed not only the core of Blair’s understanding of globalisation - a vision of a transforming world economy, driven by technological advance, and demanding a
modernisation process capable of re-synchronising politics, society and economy - but also
the ancillary vision of a concerted international response to impending environmental disaster
and an unfolding military and security catastrophe triggered by the spread of radical Islam.
Cameron's only novel contribution to this discourse was, as as Finlayson (2011) has noted,
the notion of the ‘post-bureaucratic age’. This highlighted the transformative potential of
technological advances usually associated with economic globalisation to democratise access
to information previously monopolised by powerful bureaucracies. A new breed of informed
and engaged citizens would emerge, capable - Cameron hoped - of ‘co-producing’
government policy and holding it to account more effectively.

Such notions formed the basis of the policy which featured most prominently in Cameron’s
speeches throughout this period: the Big Society. The clearest (although still somewhat
nebulous) exposition of the Big Society was set out in the 2010 Conservative manifesto:

The size, scope and role of government in the UK has reached a point where it is now
inhibiting, not advancing, the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality,
and increasing general well-being. We can’t go on pretending that government has all
the answers. Our alternative to big government is the Big Society: a society with much
higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society
where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and
their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social
responsibility, not state control. (Conservative Party 2010)

However, the Big Society had little impact on the general policy orientation of a prospective
Cameron government. ‘Social Action Zones’ - a Big Society take on Thatcher’s Enterprise
Zones - and the National Citizens Service - a voluntary personal development programme designed to encourage social action among 16 and 17-year-olds - were the only substantive policies linked to the Big Society during this period. Meanwhile, the policies which received most fanfare were plans to introduce a tax break for married couples, stage a referendum on the EU Constitution and withdraw from the social chapter and, following the onset of the financial crisis, to restore the Bank of England’s power to regulate financial markets and rein in public spending in order to deal with the mounting budget deficit. It is difficult to see how any of these policy commitments represented a significant departure from the existing political and institutional configuration of British politics. For example, the married couples tax break was a matter of raw political calculation which did little to alter the basic contours of the overall tax system and the measures relating to the EU stopped far short of having the potential to precipitate a British exit. In fact, it is noteworthy that many of the policy commitments made by Cameron before the 2010 general election were ‘negative’ commitments, in the sense that they were commitments to scrap policies which Labour had, or was planning to introduce, such as Cameron’s promises to abolish the Human Rights Act and ID cards.

Cameron made only sparing references to Conservative predecessors such as Michael Howard and Iain Duncan-Smith throughout this period. When it came to Margaret Thatcher’s legacy Cameron adopted an equivocal stance designed to deflect Labour's attacks while avoiding antagonising partisans outside the modernising camp. As he put it in an interview prior to winning the leadership he was ‘certainly a big Thatcher fan, but I don't know whether that makes me a Thatcherite.’ In a similar vein, Cameron's oft-repeated soundbite - ‘there is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state’ - sought
to distance the party from claims of an uncaring Thatcherite individualism, but without requiring it to sign-up to Labour’s approach to spending on public services in its entirety.

There was a decided shift in Cameron’s political rhetoric after Blair’s departure in 2007. Cameron adopted a much more antagonistic stance towards Gordon Brown. The conciliatory language Cameron used to describe Blair’s politics was almost completely absent from his considerations of Brown. Prior to the financial crisis, Cameron criticised Brown for imposing an undue regulatory burden on business, wasting public money and acting as a ‘roadblock’ in the way of Blair’s public service reforms (which Cameron largely endorsed). Once the financial crisis hit Brown came in for much harsher criticism. Cameron held him responsible for having ‘sowed the seeds’ of the financial crisis by claiming for himself as Chancellor the powers to regulate financial markets and, compounding this error, abandoning Conservative spending plans after 1999, which meant that when the financial crisis did hit, Treasury coffers were empty (Cameron, 2008).

Furthermore, by 2009 Cameron was seeking to discursively articulate the financial crisis as the ‘debt crisis’. This rhetorical device allowed him, for the first time since becoming leader, to establish a clear dividing line between a profligate Labour party, symbolised by ‘spendaholic’ Gordon Brown, and a reinvigorated and yet sensible and trustworthy Conservative party. As part of this a determined effort was made to undermine Brown’s leadership credentials on the grounds that his experience as Chancellor accounted for naught given a financial catastrophe of his own making:

To do difficult things for the long-term or even to get us through the financial crisis in the short term what matters more than experience is character and judgement, and what
you really believe needs to happen to make things right. I believe that to rebuild our economy, it’s not more of the same we need, but change… Experience is the excuse of the incumbent over the ages. Experience is what they always say when they try to stop change. In 1979, James Callaghan had been Home Secretary, Foreign Secretary and Chancellor before he became Prime Minister. He had plenty of experience. But thank God we changed him for Margaret Thatcher (Cameron 2008).

However, the significance of Cameron's harsher rhetoric from 2007 should not be overestimated. Not only because it did little to interrupt the lines of policy continuity outlined above, but for two other reasons as well. Firstly, such rhetoric is to be expected in the run-up to a general election. Secondly, because Cameron made it abundantly clear at the height of the financial crisis that he was committed to rescuing a regime that New Labour had imperilled with its mania for statist solutions and which, as the 2010 general election neared, he presented as under further threat from leftist calls to strengthen rather than withdraw the state from economic management. On the basis of our analysis it is hard to conclude that Cameron is anything other than an affiliate of a vulnerable regime. As such, he has faced the challenge of a disjunctive premiership.

Characterising the Disjunctive Premiership

Skowronek's account of disjunctive leadership is considerably less developed than those of the politics of articulation, reconstruction or pre-emption. He is nevertheless emphatic; disjunctive leadership is “the very definition of the impossible leadership situation” (1993, p.39). This is because, as a regime affiliate, the disjunctive president cannot repudiate existing governmental commitments. But equally, given the regime's vulnerability, they cannot convincingly affirm those same commitments either. They become “consumed by a
problem that is really prerequisite to leadership, that of establishing any credibility at all.” (1993, p.39) They also have fewer and weaker options to establish their own authority. For Skowronek, “Authority takes the form of a timely set of warrants addressed to the circumstances that brought the president to power, warrants that promise to justify and sustain the exercise of presidential power.” (2011, p.84) The only warrant available to disjunctive presidents is a technocratic one. They reify technique, claiming a privileged insight into national problems and a special personal dedication to their resolution. Ultimately,

Anything short of a miraculous solution will pass to the opposition effective control over the political definition of the situation… these affiliates stigmatize the current situation as wholly untenable… they become the foils for reconstructive leadership, the indispensable premise upon which traditional regime opponents generate the authority to repudiate the establishment wholesale. (1993, p.40)

Yet, we should be cautious in assuming that this dismal and deterministic trajectory applies to disjunctive prime ministers in Britain. Firstly, the prime minister's greater authority makes it likely that “disjunctive prime ministers will be less obvious failures than disjunctive presidents are.” (Laing & McCaffrie 2013, p.87) Secondly, a disjunctive prime minister may not automatically cede authority to opponents as Skowronek expects. British opposition parties also need to position themselves in political time. It is not inevitable that they will pursue reconstructive politics and the regime will be less vulnerable if Leaders of the Opposition are also affiliated to it. Thirdly, political regimes in the UK have tended to be more resilient than Skowronek expects of those in the US (see for example, Gamble 2014, p.31) and may persist for some considerable time before they are repudiated. Finally, it is
possible that a disjunctive prime minister may be able to call upon a wider range of warrants for authority than their presidential counterparts.

Identification of the characteristics and constraints of disjunctive leadership in Britain is therefore necessary. However many prime ministers are candidates for classification as disjunctive leaders and so a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, here we analyse the premierships of Edward Heath (1970-74), Harold Wilson (1974-76), and James Callaghan (1976-79). Each is clearly a disjunctive prime minister. They aimed to stabilise and rehabilitate a set of governing commitments rendered vulnerable by a structural crisis of the international economy and claims of overload and ungovernability (see for example, King 1976). Taken together their speeches, combined with existing secondary accounts, allow us to identify warrants which were sought by several individuals facing the challenge of disjunctive leadership. We then use the same sources to extend Skowronek's analysis by identifying a set of governing dilemmas and strategic options which were common to these disjunctive premierships.

Like disjunctive presidents, each staked claims to governing authority on the basis of their personal expertise and governing approach. For Heath, "the government of Britain was too serious a matter to be carried forward in the style of Mr Harold Wilson." (Hurd 1979, p.14; see also Conservative Party 1970; Heath 1971) while technocratic reforms of Whitehall would resolve other governing dilemmas. Wilson's appeal in 1974 rested on his personal qualities and insights "as a Labour Baldwin - a long-established national leader whom the voters could trust not to get into a flap." (Pimlott 1992, p.610; see also Wilson 1974). Callaghan made a virtue of having held all the major offices of state but also claimed a better
 entrenched sense of right and wrong than his predecessor (see Morgan 1997, pp.486, 527).

However, a wider range of warrants beyond those proposed by Skowronek is evident. Firstly, given regime vulnerability, each sought to lower expectations by conveying the scale of national difficulties and the absence of easy solutions. For example, Heath warned the nation in December 1973 that it “would have a harder Christmas than any since the war” (Clark 1973). Wilson and Callaghan repeatedly returned to the the warning set out in the February 1974 manifesto that the nation faced “the most serious political and economic crisis since 1945.” (Labour Party 1974, p.1) Secondly, all supplemented their technocratic warrants with calls for national unity and reconciliation. As his industrial relations policies unravelled, Heath repeatedly called for national unity (see for example Wood:1972vz Clark 1973). Wilson presented himself as uniting the nation after his divisive predecessor (see for example, Labour Party 1975, p.180) while Callaghan portrayed himself as “the respected social patriot out for national unity.” (Morgan 1999, p.47)

These premierships also reveal several strategies to manage the vulnerable regime. Firstly, it is striking that these prime ministers sought to buy time and wait out events in the hope that conditions would change. The arrival of North Sea Oil presented the prospect of additional resources to revitalise the existing regime (see for example Wilson 1979; p. 16 Callaghan 1977). Short-term measures of stabilisation like Wilson’s £6 pay policy (Pimlott 1992, p.664) and Callaghan’s Lib-Lab pact (Morgan 1997, p.569) carried the hope that economic recovery would gain momentum and rescue their prospects. Secondly, where time could not be bought, these prime ministers pursued adaptive strategies to attempt to revive the existing regime, particularly policy u-turns and 'inter-paradigm borrowing' (Hay 2013, p.23). Heath's
government became increasingly economically interventionist, nationalising Rolls Royce, rescuing the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, adopting an activist industrial policy and seeking to revive tripartite consultation. Similarly, Callaghan pursued a “monetarily contained Keynesianism” (Fforde 1983, p.203) as the regime’s economic difficulties grew.

Such strategies, however, invite dilemmas that are intrinsic to the disjunctive premiership. U-turns erode the claim to a warrant of governing competence. Accusations of ideological inconsistency accompany inter-paradigm borrowing. Both can serve to magnify the problems of party management that present a general difficulty for disjunctive prime ministers. Under each of these prime ministers, parliamentary dissent reached record levels (Norton 1978; 1980). If Heath did not face rebellions on central issues or at Cabinet level there was nevertheless doubt about Heath’s lack of a guiding philosophy and growing disaffection in Conservative ranks, particularly after the humiliation of the first miners’ strike and the 1972 Industry Act (Ramsden 1996, p.27). Wilson and Callaghan's problems of party management were even more acute. By-election defeats and a sequence of defections rendered the government vulnerable to defeat in the Commons.

Like Heath, Wilson and Callaghan came to be viewed by many within their party as pragmatists adrift of ideological anchors. In each case populist and maverick figures served as a focus for disaffection with the established regime. For Heath, it was Enoch Powell who articulated the need for a reconstructive solution to national malaise. Under Wilson and Callaghan, Tony Benn became the repository of left-wing hopes for a reconstructive alternative. Nor were such mavericks the only avenue for disaffection. This period of disjunctive politics is notable as the moment in which the post-war mould of a stable two-party system was broken. Growing disillusion with the governing parties found avenues for
political expression in the Liberal Party, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the National Front, all of which recorded notable electoral advances during this decade.

**Evaluating Cameron’s Disjunctive Premiership**

If we are to evaluate David Cameron's premiership we need to identify criteria to distinguish degrees of success among disjunctive prime ministers. In Skowronek’s account disjunctive presidents clearly have scope to exercise individual agency. Carter is portrayed as more successful than Franklin Pierce in operating within the constraints of the disjunctive presidency, for example. However, it has been left to Laing and McCaffrie (Laing & McCaffrie 2015) to develop a framework for more systematic evaluation of disjunctive presidents. Firstly, their personal success in attaining policy goals, personal popularity and, re-election can be assessed. Their ability to prepare their coalition for the collapse of the regime and to minimise electoral damage - their partisan regime success - can also be gauged. Finally, disjunctive presidents can be distinguished by their normative success - their ability to uphold the Constitution and maintain trust in government while engaging in policy experimentation that will benefit their successors.

This framework represents a significant advance on Skowronek's implication that the ‘impossible leadership situation’ inevitably begets failure. The distinction between personal and partisan regime success is particularly useful. For example, a disjunctive prime minister who enjoys personal popularity may dilute the toxic effects of disjunctive leadership on their party, secure re-election and thereby postpone or forestall regime reconstruction. However, Laing and McCaffrie appear to share Skowronek’s assumption that the emergence of a reconstructive alternative is an inevitable outcome of disjunctive presidencies. It is unclear why a disjunctive leader would be motivated to attempt policy experiments to lay the
foundations for later regime change or why they would prioritise electoral damage limitation over efforts to rescue the existing regime.

Accordingly, here we advance our own criteria drawing upon our analysis of the disjunctive premiership. Our starting point is that disjunctive leaders will seek wherever possible to address their chief governing dilemma: to preserve the regime which they are affiliated to. We do not expect a disjunctive prime minister to resolve the fundamental problems facing the regime. However, they should use what agency is available to them to maintain that regime and, if at all possible stabilise it. Indeed, a particularly skilful exponent of disjunctive leadership may be able maintain a dysfunctional set of political-institutional relations if not indefinitely, then at least for a prolonged period. Policy experimentation may be one tactic which profits disjunctive leaders, but it will be motivated by regime stabilisation rather than as an act of conscious grace for a reconstructive successor. The maintenance of a vulnerable regime may also call for successful crisis management and the ability to frustrate reconstructive appeals emerging from their own, or opposing parties. Such objectives of regime stabilisation are also likely to be furthered if the prime minister concerned can successfully deploy the warrants for authority that they construct. A successful disjunctive prime minister would find their claims to authority accepted by their party, the electorate, the commentariat and perhaps even by opposition parties. In addition, their success will be enhanced if they can avoid or manage the dilemmas characteristic to the disjunctive premiership identified above. Effective management of expectations, projection of a clear policy vision, effective party management and the marginalisation of maverick and populist critics are challenges that a highly successful disjunctive prime minister will meet.
Cameron’s warrants to governing authority

Where Heath, Wilson and Callaghan all sought authority on claims to personal expertise and governing competence, Cameron did not initially make comparable assertions. He possessed considerable political experience (Barber 2013) but doubtless recognised advising John Major, Norman Lamont and Michael Howard might not represent the best warrant for authority. Instead, Cameron continued to stress his personal determination to take tough decisions without hesitation. This particularly applied to addressing Britain’s debt ‘crisis’ (see for example, Cameron 2010c; Cameron 2010d) but also grasping the nettle of relations with Europe (Cameron 2013) and confronting demands for Scottish independence (Cameron 2014a). Secondly, he emphasised how his personal values would equip him to take these tough decisions. For Cameron stabilisation and rehabilitation of the regime above all demanded promotion of the value of responsibility. Deficit reduction demanded financial responsibility. Stabilisation of financial institutions required responsible behaviour by bankers. Only responsible action by communities, families and individuals would address social problems and construct a ‘Big Society’. The prototypical claim of the disjunctive prime minister to personal competence only became plausible after some time in office. Here, opinion polls demonstrated that Cameron succeeded in convincing a majority of voters that he was a capable leader, particularly relative to his Labour counterpart. This formed a key component of the warrant Cameron advanced as his claim for a second term. He was a competent prime minister in possession of a long-term economic plan (see for example, Cameron 2014a; Cameron 2015).

Cameron also continued to successfully deploy narratives embedded at the time of the financial crisis. He entered office at “a grave moment in the modern history of Britain”
(Cameron 2012), facing “the worst inheritance of any incoming government for at least sixty years” (Cameron 2010c) with “public finances that can only be described as catastrophic” (Cameron 2010b). These narratives served several purposes. They lowered expectations and disassociated Cameron from responsibility for causing the nation's economic difficulties. They provided political cover when growth and deficit reduction targets were missed. They also hampered Labour in its efforts to restore its economic credibility. Cameron and Osborne consequently enjoyed a significant opinion poll lead on economic matters throughout the parliament and voters continued to attribute primary responsibility for the UK's economic difficulties to Labour.

Cameron accompanied warnings of the perils facing the nation with claims to act in the national rather than partisan or sectional interest. This served as the public rationale for establishing a coalition government. He and Clegg were “both political leaders who want to put aside party differences and work hard for the common good and for the national interest” (Cameron 2010a) particularly to secure the stability demanded by financial markets. In Baldwinesque fashion, Cameron also presented his austerity measures as national rather than sectional (see Jackson & Mcclymont 2011). As he articulated it in June 2010, “We are not driven by some theory or some ideology. We are doing this as a government because we have to, driven by the urgent truth that unless we do so, people will suffer and our national interest will suffer too.” (Cameron 2010e)

However, disjunctive prime ministers often find themselves undermining warrants previously asserted. For example Callaghan's claim to a unique working relationship with the unions was subverted by the ‘winter of discontent’. Cameron was not compromised so comprehensively, but several warrants appeared less compelling after five years in office. A desire to deliver
stability and reassurance to the markets seemed at odds with the uncertainty generated by renegotiation of Britain’s EU membership. His warrant to serve national rather than partisan or sectional interests was also eroded. Abolition of the 50p top rate of tax was presented as benefitting Conservative ministers, donors and core voters (see for example: HC Deb (2012-13) 560 cols. 948-949). Criticism grew that austerity measures affected the weakest and most vulnerable in society disproportionately. Indeed, Labour gained some traction with its ambitions to create a fairer Britain and challenge sectional interests more robustly than Cameron could (see for example Miliband 2012). By the time of the 2015 election, the public grew sceptical of Cameron’s claim to serve the national interest: 65% believed Cameron was out of touch with ordinary people by April 2015.

**Cameron and the dilemmas of disjunctive leadership**

We observed above that disjunctive prime ministers struggle to establish a clear policy vision. Constant reiteration of the parlous conditions in which he governed carried the risk that audiences grew deaf to Cameron's other objectives. As he noted in 2014,“Too often we’ve given the impression that we’re just about fixing problems rather than changing things for a purpose.” (Cameron 2014b). If Cameron succeeded in establishing deficit reduction as his duty, he failed to convey a more positive vision. Enthusiasm for the ‘Big Society’ faded early in office and from 2012 Cameron switched to a vision of equipping Britain to succeed in “the global race” (see Cameron 2012). Both efforts failed to gain traction with the commentariat, the public and Cameron's own MPs.

Cameron also fell victim to the tendency of disjunctive prime ministers to preside over avoidable errors, policy failures and noticeable u-turns. A sequence of errors and retreats in
the government's first year including withdrawal of free school milk, the closure of NHS
Direct, provision of free books to schools, the sale of Forestry Commission land and a
‘pause’ on NHS reform led to complaints about a lack of ‘grip’ and competence by No.10.
However, a strengthened centre, including a u-turn on the self-imposed limit on the numbers
of special advisers, failed to halt the sequence of mis-steps. In economic policy, the 2012
Budget descended into an ‘omnishambles’. The 2012 Autumn Statement acknowledged the
deficit would not be cleared before the end of the parliament. By 2013 the AAA credit rating
that Cameron had pledged to defend had been surrendered. Targets to reduce immigration to
‘tens of thousands’ were predictably (Bale & Hampshire 2012) missed. Universal Credit, the
centrepiece of welfare reform, was serially delayed and its feasibility questioned (House of
Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2015). Yet, such difficulties did not significantly
damage Cameron's personal reputation for several reasons. Firstly, Cameron possessed
accomplished presentational skills exceeding those of many of his disjunctive predecessors
(see for example Hurd 1979, p.81). Secondly, he was not confronted by an evidently more
dynamic, resolute or capable Leader of the Opposition with the instinct to capitalise on such
incompetence (Bale 2015, p.262). Thirdly, the print media remained broadly sympathetic. If
some Conservative supporting newspapers, such as the Daily Mail, were personally hostile to
Cameron, they reserved considerably greater vitriol for Ed Miliband (see infamously, Levy
2013).

With 35% of all divisions witnessing rebellions by coalition MPs, the 2010-15 government
was the most rebellious since 1945 (Cowley 2015). Many of these rebellions were of little
lasting significance. However, several demonstrated fundamental divisions within
Conservative ranks. Large-scale rebellions on an EU referendum and the EU budget signalled
the hardening of Eurosceptic opinion. The August 2013 defeat on military intervention in
Syria undermined Cameron’s authority on foreign and defence policy while the ring-fencing of international development spending at a time of defence cuts seemed to signal disconnection from mainstream Conservative priorities (Heppell & Lightfoot 2012, p.136). Many Conservative parliamentarians were furious that Cameron granted the Liberal Democrats a referendum on AV and 91 rebelled against House of Lords reform. That the majority of Conservative MPs refused to support same-sex marriage demonstrated that Cameron’s social liberalism and the social conservative plurality in his parliamentary party were in conflict (Heppell 2013a). Indeed, for many in his party, Cameron seemed an inauthentic voice of conservatism. Yet, despite such difficulties in party management, Cameron, like Heath, Wilson and Callaghan, escaped a leadership challenge. Rebels in his ranks may have circumscribed his authority, but in the absence of a consensus on a replacement and the failure of a well-organised faction to gain ascendancy (Norton 2015) his party did not move against him.

Like his disjunctive predecessors Cameron also confronted maverick, populist politicians who secured considerable support. Both Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage developed iconoclasm as a political brand. They appeared to offer an authenticity and conviction which eluded the political class, Cameron included. High profile disagreements between Johnson and Cameron emerged on issues including immigration, the bedroom tax and transport policy. But beyond serving his own ambitions and the interests of London there was little evidence of a coherent alternative prospectus. While confined to City Hall he represented a distraction rather than a menace to Cameron. In contrast, Cameron struggled to find an effective strategy to counter Nigel Farage and UKIP. Farage staked a claim to reconstructive leadership as a tribune for those alienated from mainstream parties and the existing regime. While Farage threatened other parties, Conservative voters (Ford et al. 2012), members
Moreover, Farage ensured that Europe and immigration remained salient issues. He was able to outbid Cameron with a demand for an immediate EU referendum and was well positioned to attack the failure to reduce net immigration to the ‘tens of thousands’. Together these issues provided Farage with a platform to question Cameron’s capacity to deliver his warrant to serve the national interest. However, given that many UKIP supporters were so thoroughly alienated from mainstream politics it wasn't clear that a more viable alternative to Cameron’s strategy of appeasing UKIP was available, or that an another Conservative leader would be better positioned to discover it (see Ford & Goodwin 2014, pp.283-4).

**Cameron and regime vulnerability**

Harold Wilson, reflecting upon his disjunctive phase, bemoaned that “Crises are not in the habit of forming queues.” (Wilson 1979, p.20) Cameron proved more fortunate. The regime vulnerability he encountered was characterised by “a domino effect” (Richards & Smith 2014, p.3). The various institutional and political calamities of 2010-15 largely followed a sequence. The emergence of a 'hybrid media system' assisted Cameron here. Critical stories gained traction more quickly but also tended to burn out much faster (see Chadwick 2013, p.164). The vulnerabilities of the established regime were also broad in scope but, in comparative terms, shallow in their severity. Whereas Heath, Wilson and Callaghan faced a regime rendered vulnerable by profound economic problems, Cameron managed a regime in which less severe economic difficulties were accompanied by vulnerabilities across a much broader range of institutions and commitments. But most significantly, Cameron's mainstream political opponents neither sought nor were able to fashion these episodes into a compelling narrative that would justify regime reconstruction. As noted above, prime
ministerial authority is also bounded by the positions adopted by opposing parties. Ed Miliband and Labour did succeed in capitalising upon some of Cameron's strategic dilemmas and errors and set the political agenda on some issues, particularly energy prices. However, Labour's positioning in political time assisted Cameron in his efforts to stabilise and maintain the regime. Although Labour's growth strategy appeared to promise a radical transition from Anglo-Saxon capitalism the party ultimately chose a more cautious appeal to the electorate (Bale 2015). Labour consequently did not make a consistent or compelling case for political reconstruction.

In exercising his own agency in the management of the regime, Cameron's ‘essay crisis’ mode of leadership quickly became a cliche. On this account Cameron rose to the occasion when crisis loomed but quickly returned to “stand-by mode” (Behr 2011). From the perspective adopted here, what is perceived as detachment is actually part of the strategic repertoire of a disjunctive prime minister: a desire to stabilise the situation in the short-term in the hope that conditions will change in the future. Such a strategy nevertheless had mixed success. Cameron failed to ride out the phone-hacking scandal and save his Director of Communications (D'Ancona 2014) but he did succeed in consigning the Leveson Inquiry's less welcome recommendations to limbo. It was less clear that scandals associated with the police had reached their apogee, never mind their resolution by the end of Cameron's first term. The creation, after several attempts, of a statutory inquiry into child sexual abuse at least provided the prospect of temporary respite.

Despite initial success in minimising centre-periphery conflict (see Randall & Seawright 2012; Convery 2014), the Union had become significantly more vulnerable by 2015. In the absence of a counter-factual it is impossible to assess whether Cameron made strategic errors
in 2012 by denying the SNP a two-question referendum and in agreeing to a two-year timescale for the referendum. Moreover, Cameron's responsibility for the pro-Union campaign in the 2014 independence referendum was limited. With the exception of the last minute intervention with Clegg and Miliband to ‘vow’ additional powers, Conservative toxicity in Scotland relegated Cameron to the role of a bystander. Nevertheless, the 'Better Together' victory was much less emphatic than had been anticipated and, in spite of their defeat, the SNP's membership and support continued to grow. In this context, the 'wicked problems' of the Barnett Formula and the West Lothian Question could not remain quarantined, nor could a second independence referendum be ruled out. In regard to Europe, Cameron's strategy delivered a similar outcome. The financial crisis, followed by the Eurozone crisis, reduced support for the EU in the UK and elsewhere. Cameron nevertheless succeeded in buying time. Like Wilson before him, Cameron found a referendum a useful basis for uniting most shades of opinion within the Conservative Party even if it did not undermine UKIP's support. But, like many disjunctive prime ministers before him, Cameron was boxed in by this commitment. There was no guarantee he could secure concessions satisfactory to his party and the electorate. Cameron had “made himself hostage to the outcome of both an unknown international renegotiation and an unknown domestic referendum result” (Copsey & Haughton 2014, p.77).

Cameron's greatest success was to buy time on the economy. Cameron very effectively magnified the regime's economic difficulties on entering office. These did not justify the apocalyptic billing they received. For example, in 2010 the coalition inherited a deficit that was the smallest in the G7 as a proportion of GDP. Most UK debt was long-term and held within the country meaning that scenarios of crisis replaying those of Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland were always unlikely. Nevertheless, economic growth slumped after Cameron
took office. It took until 2014 for the economy to surpass its pre-financial crisis peak and the government had to amend its timetable for deficit reduction. However, economic growth had strengthened and unemployment had fallen significantly by the 2015 election. Yet Cameron’s ambitions to rebalance the economy away from reliance on debt and personal consumption made little progress (Berry & Hay 2014). Coupled with the on-going economic difficulties in the Eurozone, a solution to the underpinning vulnerabilities of the UK’s political economy remained to be discovered.

**Conclusion: David Cameron in Political Time**

Cameron and his acolytes hold an undisguised admiration for Tony Blair and Labour's modernisers. Yet, his standing within his own party is also often assessed by reference to Margaret Thatcher (see Evans 2010). Our argument is that both represent ill-judged models to evaluate Cameron's premiership. British prime ministers find their leadership qualities tested in different circumstances and Thatcher and Blair were situated in different points in political time. Cameron was a disjunctive prime minister between 2010 and 2015, best evaluated alongside others, like Heath, Wilson and Callaghan, who were affiliates of a vulnerable regime. Our analysis suggests that when viewed in such company, Cameron negotiated the constraints and challenges of disjunctive leadership relatively successfully in his first term.

He was effective in deploying many of the warrants to authority he constructed. He succeeded in fostering an image of competence relative to his rivals. He disassociated himself from responsibility for many of the travails of the regime and lowered expectations with considerable accomplishment. His claim to prioritise national above sectional and partisan interests, however, did not survive his first term un tarnished. Cameron also failed to escape
many of the dilemmas of disjunctive leadership. His party was divided and his government committed a series of policy mistakes and u-turns. Cameron's personal reputation nevertheless remained largely undamaged. He was rather less fortunate and successful in meeting the populist challenge of Nigel Farage and UKIP. Cameron was able to associate himself with the stabilisation of some of the commitments of the political regime. In particular, he was able to claim credit for strengthening economic growth and forestalled potentially regime-changing reforms including electoral reform and statutory regulation of the press. However, pathologies continued to manifest in respect of other regime commitments. While Cameron bought time on Scotland and Britain's relations with the EU, these regime commitments appeared more vulnerable following his first term in office.

That Cameron secured a second term in office and freed himself from the constraints of coalition is a further marker of his success as a disjunctive prime minister. However, it prompts the question of whether Cameron could escape the constraints of disjunctive politics and become an orthodox innovator or a reconstructive leader in his second term. We should entertain the possibility. For a prime minister, political time can change during their period in office. Regime vulnerability may change whether as a result of prime ministerial agency or changing structural conditions. Similarly, prime ministers may revise or seek out new warrants for authority. This suggests that it is better to reconceive Skowronek's two-by-two table as a graph on two axes (figure 2) in which prime ministers may move within and possibly between quadrants over time.

[Figure 2 about here]
However, we remain sceptical about Cameron's capacity to escape the disjunctive quadrant. For Cameron to become an orthodox innovator would demand a degree of regime resilience that Cameron failed to secure in his first term. Cameron failed to resolve the pathologies of a vulnerable regime. We also doubt Cameron's capacity to switch to a reconstructive mode of leadership. Firstly, Cameron did not construct a new electoral coalition in 2015. While Cameron triumphed over expectations, 36.8% of the vote and a historically small majority of twelve do not compare with the electoral authority secured by reconstructive prime ministers like Attlee and Thatcher. He was the least worst alternative for many voters and his return to office owed a great deal to his opponents' misfortunes - his coalition partners' electoral collapse (which provided 27 of 37 Conservative gains) and Labour's disintegration in Scotland. Secondly, Cameron did not construct new warrants for authority that would support a reconstructive project. His appeal in 2015 was to 'safety first', stressing his competence and exploiting concerns about Labour's economic management and the threat of instability posed by the SNP. Thirdly, Cameron's unexpected electoral victory enhanced his political capital with his party and, in conjunction with Labour's disarray, potentially bought him more time and scope to present solutions to regime vulnerabilities. However, many of the dilemmas he encountered in his first term persist and several look forbidding. Party management will remain challenging. His second term government possesses a smaller Commons majority than the coalition's. Having pre-announced he will not serve a third term, Cameron risks his authority seeping away and a disorderly leadership transition. Although UKIP returned only one MP in 2015 it also still presents a threat. The party secured the third largest share of the vote and is now second-placed in 120 constituencies. Fourthly, playing the English card and calling for renegotiation of EU membership bought Cameron time in his first term. In his second term he now has to meet the expectations he has generated and successfully adapt the existing regime to meet these challenges. Accordingly, we anticipate that Cameron's second
term will present a considerable challenge to the skills in disjunctive leadership that he has already demonstrated.

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Source: British Social Attitudes Surveys

Figure 2:

Vulnerable regime

Disjunction

Reconstruction

Affiliated to regime

Articulation

Pre-emption

Resilient regime