

Seldon, Anthony, Meakin, Jonathan and Thoms, Illias. *The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 338 pages, Hardcover, \$25.95.

There are a great many political offices worldwide that provide intrigue and the office of the British Prime Minister is certainly one of these. Initially, it was created with the intent of serving the British people in a highly important way, taking responsibility for the various policy decisions of the British government. This role has been the focal point of British policy, both domestically and internationally. It is a role whose position description has tightened over time as the British people and government realized the numerous facets that needed to change due to a variety of different political initiatives and political sustainability. *The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister* takes readers on a journey of understanding the myriad intricacies of this office and how it developed over time.

Anthony Seldon's scholarship for the office of the prime minister is extensive given that he founded the Institute of Contemporary British History and has edited several books on this important office. He is also the "honorary historian of Number 10 Downing Street and is Chair of the National Archives Trust" (pp. Xi, xii, book sleeve). He has also interviewed all senior figures who have worked in Number 10 for the last fifty years" (book sleeve). Seldon explains in the preface of *The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister* that his work as a historian has left him with several questions: "Is the office of the prime minister still the same over the years? Why did it emerge in 1721? How has it survived? Can and how should the office be strengthened? Why are only some PMs successful? Have political scientists been asking the wrong questions, e.g. has the office *become* presidential, and why don't they and historians of prime ministers talk more? Why do people want to be PM, and did the experience fulfill them?" (pp. xii). These questions are important as they address many important facets of the office of the

Prime Minister, bringing forth insights into the overall organizational structure of the office and how it has served Great Britain. Seldon et al., also note that there are other organic factors that impacted the development of the office and impacted the development of the United Kingdom explaining that numerous events and remarkable individuals are also part of this story.

The Impossible Office is divided into ten chapters that cover important aspects of the development of the office of the Prime Minister. While Seldon et al., take readers on a historical journey to understand more of how this office and role developed within English history, cleverly, the authors create genres in how they discusses these developments. The chapters are titled based on these categories: “Chapter 1: the Bookend Prime Ministers: Walpole and Johnson; Chapter 2: A Country Transformed, 1721-2021; Chapter 3: the Liminal Premiership: from the Saxons to 1806; Chapter 4: the Transformational Prime Ministers, 1806-2021; Chapter 5: the Powers and Resources of the Prime Minister, 1721-2021; Chapter 6: the Constraints on the Prime Minister, 1721-2021; Chapter 7, the Eclipse of the Monarchy, 1660-2021; Chapter 8: the Rise and Fall of the Foreign Secretary, 1782-2021; Chapter 9: the Rise, and Rise, of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1660-2021; and Chapter 10: the Impossible Office? The Prime Minister by 2021.” Seldon et al., acknowledge the myriad intricacies and intense scrutiny of the office of the Prime Minister. They write, “the prime minister is the most written about, but the most under-examined, part of the British constitution” (pp. 328). They note that “We have lacked serious enquiries into the operation of the office of prime minister and how it might be performed better” (pp. 328). They end the book with a number of recommendations for the improvement of the office of the Prime Minister.

The Impossible Office? The History of the British Prime Minister is a fascinating historical account. While highlighting the numerous pieces of history that contributed to the

development of the British Prime Minister as a political office, Seldon et al., also include numerous recommendations that highlight the organic nature of the development of the office setting forth a path of where the role may go next. This book is an important read and certainly would be good for a British history or public administration student—or anyone else interested in how executive government roles develop over time.

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