

The Cabinet Papers 1915-1978 Online

Review Number:

828

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 November, 2009

Date of Publication:

2009

Publisher:

The National Archives

Publisher url:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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In December 1916 the new British prime minister, David Lloyd George, sought to overcome the problems of waging the First World War through an unwieldy Cabinet by establishing a smaller, streamlined mechanism, the War Cabinet. He also set up a secretariat, the cabinet office, which would be overseen by the cabinet secretary, Maurice Hankey, and his deputy, Tom Jones. On 9 December 1916 Jones took the notes for the first ever Cabinet minutes.⁽¹⁾ Thereafter, there would be typed (and later printed) agendas, minutes of meetings and memoranda for discussion at each Cabinet. Despite the resistance of other parts of Whitehall, and Sir Warren Fisher's treasury in particular, the Cabinet Office survived the fall of Lloyd George from power in 1922 and continues to this day.

The cabinet is at the apex of the British governmental system – argument continues about its position since 1997. Its records offer a clear picture of the main lines of British government policy on both domestic and foreign affairs. All the great decisions came to cabinet: only rarely did the prime minister avoid bringing a topic there. The minutes of these meetings provide vital indications of what issues reached the cabinet. The memoranda circulated for discussion contain assessments of issues and policy proposals that tell us something about government and departmental thinking. The frequency with which certain topics were discussed and the length of such discussions are important measures of their significance. These records, however, have a clinical quality that does not, in general, convey the tone of the meetings and the importance attached to particular agenda items. Nor do they usually capture the play of debate, reverting invariably to the formula that discussion ensued on a number of aspects of the topic. More valuable for those who want to track the views of individuals and the more precise points made in debate are the handwritten records of successive cabinet secretaries who then had to condense them into versions that became the printed minutes. Even these records, however, can be terse.

The National Archives (TNA) have made a massive contribution to scholars and citizens alike by making these three sets of records available online in *The Cabinet Papers, 1915–1978* [2]. Although the Cabinet Office records only begin in December 1916, the first group of cabinet memoranda opens with a series of papers from January 1915 to December 1916 produced by the Committee of Imperial Defence (a Cabinet sub-committee, comprising the prime minister, defence ministers and the professional chiefs of the armed

forces, set up in 1902 to advise on defence policy). It makes accessible documents that were previously only available at Kew or through the microfilm collections held by certain libraries around the United Kingdom. (2) There are complete runs of minutes and memoranda from December 1916 to December 1978. The reproduction of the notebooks is a wonderful boon to scholars. Alas, only a small portion of these records are currently accessible. They ostensibly cover 1939–1955 but in fact are even less full than that, as there is a gap in the records from November 1943 to March 1945. The creators of the site wisely opted to reproduce exact replicas, in pdf form, of these documents.

It is a pity that another important category of Cabinet Office files was not included, namely CAB 21 – the Cabinet Registered Files. These papers are not as orderly as the printed minutes and memoranda, and the handwritten notebooks. Their various folders contain notes, letters, minutes, memoranda, draft telegrams and manuscript comments on texts. Although a little less easy to digitise, they could be included without too much difficulty. They are, in essence, the working files of the Cabinet Office, and the cabinet secretary in particular, with the prime minister. They offer valuable insights into the ways successive premiers and cabinet secretaries handled issues and ran the cabinet. One case might serve to illustrate the point. After the collapse of co-operation between the British, French and Americans with the Soviets in December 1947, the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, produced a cabinet paper, ‘The First Aim of Foreign Policy’, on 4 January 1948. It argued for resistance to the Soviets by building a West European system with American aid. It contained the phrase, ‘the countries of western Europe . . . despise the spiritual values of America’. (3) In a note to the prime minister, the cabinet secretary, Sir Norman Brook advised, ‘Can we be confident of securing American support for a policy which is based on overseas publicity designed to show that the policies of the British government represent a golden mean between the disastrous extremes of Russian communism and American capitalism?’. The phrase was omitted from the copy sent to Washington. (4) The cabinet registered files contain many other instances, which have been well exploited by Peter Hennessy in a number of studies. Perhaps the TNA will be able to obtain the funding to add these documents to its site at some future date.

Another important class of files worthy of digitisation are the papers of the prime minister, given the TNA classification PREM. If the minutes, memoranda and notebooks capture the central decisions of government and the general thinking behind them, the PREM papers allow the reader to trace the development of issues and the debates about how to tackle them. The PREM files gather for the prime minister the most important memoranda and minutes, telegrams, records of conversations, letters and despatches between officials and ministers; and, therefore, are invaluable in providing an understanding of how and why decisions were taken. The PREM classification contains currently 21 separate categories of files. Ideally it would be best to put all of these online. If a selection must be made, then the successive groupings of ‘correspondence and papers’ should be digitised – PREM 1 (1916–1940), PREM 4 (1934–1946), PREM 8 (1945–1951), PREM 11 (1951–1964), PREM 13 (1964–1970), PREM 15 (1970–74), PREM 16 (1974–79), PREM 19 (1979–1997). They would be an admirable companion to the cabinet papers resource.

The Cabinet Papers website is bright and clear in layout. However, its existence is not immediately obvious to someone going to the TNA home site, though the route to the documents is easy enough. One of the buttons across the top of the page is ‘search the archives’ whose drop-down menu contains the option ‘cabinet papers’. The menu also has ‘Documents Online’, which contains Cabinet Papers as one of its options. The Cabinet Papers home page offers three ways of finding the records, though at first glance only two of them are visible. On the left of the home page there is a search facility that allows the viewer to enter a word or words and a date. This is a very effective search engine, as it brings up precise details of cabinet meetings with both original Cabinet Office and TNA references. In addition, in the case of cabinet meetings, it tells you who attended the meeting and the main agenda items. But it does not bring up the document. You must note the reference and go elsewhere to locate the document. The second means of searching is at the centre of the screen – a browse by theme option. It has three main sections. The first themed heading is the United Kingdom and the world. It has sub-sections on total war; [limited war, conflict and the politics of defence](#) [3]; [empire, commonwealth and de-colonisation](#) [4]; and [diplomacy and foreign relations](#) [5]. The second heading is the economy, business and resources. This has two sub-divisions: [industry, agriculture and commerce](#)

[6]; and [infrastructure, energy and natural resources](#) [7]. The third heading addresses society and the welfare state. Its sub-headings are [law, liberty and society](#) [8]; [welfare, social security and self-help](#) [9]; and [education](#) [10]. Each of these sections has further sub-divisions, which contain brief outlines of their topics. Many of them include a list of documents which can be viewed by clicking on their title. Some, however, contain only an outline of the theme, as, for example, is the case for 'Rearmament plans', which can be found at UK and the world/limited war, conflict and the politics of defence/defence policy 1933–39.

The third route to the documents is the best means of searching these sources for historians but it is not well signposted. On the right hand side of the home page there are four sections in a column; one of them is Cabinet and Government under which there is the entry 'meetings and papers'. Clicking on this item brings up the main documentary categories on the site: CAB 23, 24, 65, 66, 67, 68, 128, 129, and 195. These are divided into First World War, interwar, Second World War and postwar minutes, and the same for the memoranda. Under these headings are the separate files, which can be opening in manageable size pdf files, though downloading speed varies according to the power of one's computer.

The other three sections on the right hand side of the home page are aimed at a wider audience than academics. There is a section for A level studies. Another is called the writing frame which is a mechanism for exploring topics as projects. Each of these sections offers summaries of key topics, short guides to reading and (for the writing frame) questions, as well as links to selected documents. The featured topics are the trade union movement, the welfare state, the general strike and the National Health Service. However, this facility allows the viewer to explore a wider range of topics. So, for example at trade union movement/1920s industrial relations there is an option to the right – 'the ten-year rule and disarmament'. Clicking on it brings up a summary of the rule that based defence planning on the assumption that there would not be a major war for a least a decade. But it offers no links to documents. To find these one must look to the right hand menu and click on the first option 'defence policy 1919–1932' (one discovers that 'the ten-year rule and disarmament' is the second option in this menu). At this page there are links to selected documents on the ten-year rule, disarmament, imperial defence, and inter-service rivalry.

Another tool is 'maps in time' which brings up a map of the world with a range of dates along the top – 1900, 1914, 1918, 1939, 1945, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. Clicking on a date brings up a map with the borders for the period from that year to the next in sequence – 1900-1914, 1914-1918 and so on. The letter 'i' (for information appears at certain places, offering such insights as 'after Italy's defeat in 1945 [sic], Italian colonies are taken over'. The maps are functional but rather basic in their information and not especially attractive.

The final facility on the right hand side of the home page is Cabinet and Government, under which is 'meetings and papers', the best means of locating documents. This section provides brief outlines of how cabinet works, how records were kept, the main cabinet posts, and the composition of different governments. There are some useful short bibliographies. By going to Cabinet and Government/cabinet government/how cabinet works one discovers that the site contains another set of documents – the precedent books. These are short documents, which provide advice about correct practice on various matters from composition of the cabinet to collective responsibility to the scope of cabinet activities to the prime minister-monarch relationship. These documents have no TNA classification and are not on any list of documents on the website. They are the kind of materials that appear regularly in the CAB 21 files.

Using the minutes, memoranda and notebooks is straightforward. When one opts for a particular group of files, there is an introductory section that explains any complications. So, for example, the prelude to the First World War minutes explains how there were the regular War Cabinet meetings but that there were also A and X series of meetings; and that the Imperial War Cabinet was a separate body. It would have been useful to explain that this body brought together senior figures across the Empire, people such as General Smuts of South Africa.

It is easy to use all three classes of documents in conjunction with one another. The notebooks follow the same notation as the printed minutes. Thus, the notes on CM 50(50) of 25 July 1950 in CAB 195/8

correspond with the minutes at CAB 128/18. The cabinet minutes identify memoranda under discussion. So the 25 July cabinet considered CP (50) 176, which can be located at CAB 129/2 by turning to the list of memoranda for the period.

For all the frequent sparseness of the minutes, these records often surprise with revealing comments. One example at random is the handling of President Roosevelt's peace initiative in January 1938. The British Ambassador in Washington, Sir Ronald Lindsay, had welcomed the proposal when put to him confidentially and he had urged British acceptance. But the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, felt 'there was a risk of his proposal cutting across our efforts'. In a statement to the cabinet (included in an addendum to the minutes) to explain his outlook, Chamberlain talked of 'this rather preposterous proposal'.⁽⁵⁾

These resources appear at a time of change for TNA. A notice on the website indicates some radical shifts. There is a greater stress on developing online resources, which is most welcome. Less pleasing is the possible closure of TNA to researchers on Mondays. Statistics about usage need to be scrutinised very carefully. Take the claim that for every one document examined on site there are 170 downloaded online. Someone using an online document might return to it several times and each return to the document would count as a further download, whereas someone looking at the file at TNA would order the item and work through it. The same research task would yield a ratio of perhaps 6:1 in favour of online usage. Surely the best way forward is to maximise the value of both the research rooms and the online facilities. The Library of Congress provides a useful precedent. During a recent research trip it was possible to work on private papers in the manuscripts room, order books for the reading room and use the free wi-fi internet connexion to use online resources from websites such as TNA's, as well as those available only to those working in the Library of Congress.

Meanwhile, this excellent website is to be warmly commended. It offers a wonderful resource. Its shortcomings are small scale and can be rectified fairly easily. Presumably each January a new set of minutes and memoranda will be added. One hopes that more of the notebooks will become available and be digitised; and that serious consideration be given to the inclusion of CAB 21. And that does not take into consideration the vast array of cabinet committees. Perhaps a selection of the more important ones, such as the foreign policy committee in the late 1930s, those on atomic energy in the Attlee years and the defence committee and (after 1963) the defence and overseas policy committee, might be placed online.

Notes

1. CAB 23/1, War Cabinet 1, 9 December 1916.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The Public Record Office, the TNA's predecessor, catalogued the minutes and memoranda for 1916-1939 as CAB 23 and CAB 24; the 1939-1945 minutes as CAB 65 and the memoranda as CAB 66, 67 and 68; and assigned CAB 128 for the minutes and CAB 129 for the memoranda in the period since 1945. The Cabinet Office had its own filing system: WC for First World War Cabinets, CC for interwar minutes, WM for Second World War minutes, and for post-1945 minutes practice varied between CM and CC. The Cabinet Secretary's Notebooks' classification is CAB 195.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. CAB 129/23, CP (48) 6, 4 January 1948.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. CAB 21/2244, Note by Sir N. Brook to the Prime Minister, 7 January 1948. For the expurgated text given to the Americans, see *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) 1948 III, 4-6.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. CAB 23/92, CC 1(38), 24 January 1938. For the American perspective, see FRUS 1938 I, 115-7 and Sumner Welles, *Seven Decisions That Shaped History* (London, 1951), 30-42.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

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Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3811>

- [2] <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>
- [3] <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/limited-war.htm>
- [4] <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/empire-commonwealth.htm>
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