

David Cameron's 'West Wing'

ConservativeIntelligence's guide to the most influential people inside the machine that has taken the Conservative Party to the edge of power

Four shadow cabinet ministers exert the most influence on the leader's inner circle.

- ▶ George Osborne MP as Shadow Chancellor and Election Coordinator is the most powerful member of David Cameron's frontbench team. He takes most of the big decisions with David Cameron.
- ▶ William Hague MP is consulted on all major judgments.
- ▶ Oliver Letwin MP does not just coordinate policy development with Steve Hilton. Letwin's views on tax, the environment, social justice and relations with the Liberal Democrats have made him 'the Gandalf figure' within Team Cameron. Like George Osborne he sits physically within David Cameron's suite of offices.
- ▶ Michael Gove MP is the other most influential member of the shadow cabinet. As author of the party's most radical policy portfolio - a supply-side revolution for the nation's schools - and as a close friend of the Cameron family he is involved in speechwriting, PMQs preparation and key strategic calls.

David Cameron's private office is characterised by considerable stability. Most of the key advisers that surround him now were part of his 2005 leadership. A good number were known to him in the early 1990s when the Tory leader first started working for the Conservative Party. This history explains the stability and solidarity of the Tory leader's private office. It has a reputation for not leaking.

The six most important members of the staff team are:

- ▶ Andy Coulson: Director of Communications and Planning.
- ▶ Catherine (Kate) Fall: Deputy Chief of Staff to David Cameron.
- ▶ Andrew Feldman: Chief Executive of the Conservative Party.
- ▶ Stephen Gilbert: The Party's head of Field Campaigning and the architect of Lord Ashcroft's target seats initiative within CCHQ. Gilbert will run the party's 'ground war' during the General Election.
- ▶ Steve Hilton: The Conservative Party's Director of Strategy and still the number one strategic influence on David Cameron.
- ▶ Ed Llewellyn: Chief of Staff to the Conservative leader.

Steve Hilton and Oliver Letwin are the principal architects of the Cameron Project's strategic consistency.

Steve Hilton, David Cameron's Director of Strategy, works more closely with Oliver Letwin than he works with any other person. If Coulson is critical to the tactical flexibility that has characterised the Cameron machine since the summer of 2007 it is still Letwin and Hilton who are critical to the strategic continuity. Many of the Project's key themes were there from the very beginning and are still there today:

- ▶ Social justice;
- ▶ Environmental responsibility;
- ▶ Avoidance of 'up front' tax cut pledges;
- ▶ 'Lovebombing' of Liberal Democrat voters;
- ▶ Civil libertarianism;
- ▶ 'Not banging on about Europe';
- ▶ Public opinion has largely to be embraced rather than led;
- ▶ A feminisation of the Party's candidates list and general appeal.

This is not to say that there have not been adjustments to strategy since the beginning of David Cameron's leadership but these adjustments have been more evolutionary than those that characterised the mid-terms of the first two parliaments in which the Conservatives were in opposition.

Noteworthy adjustments have included a relative downgrading of the green agenda and an upgrading of the social justice agenda; an abandonment of the tactic of matching Labour on spending; a relaxation of the A-list and its original target of 50% women candidates; and fourth, a greater volume for issues like crime and immigration but still a much reduced emphasis compared with that placed on them by William Hague (2001) and Michael Howard (2005).

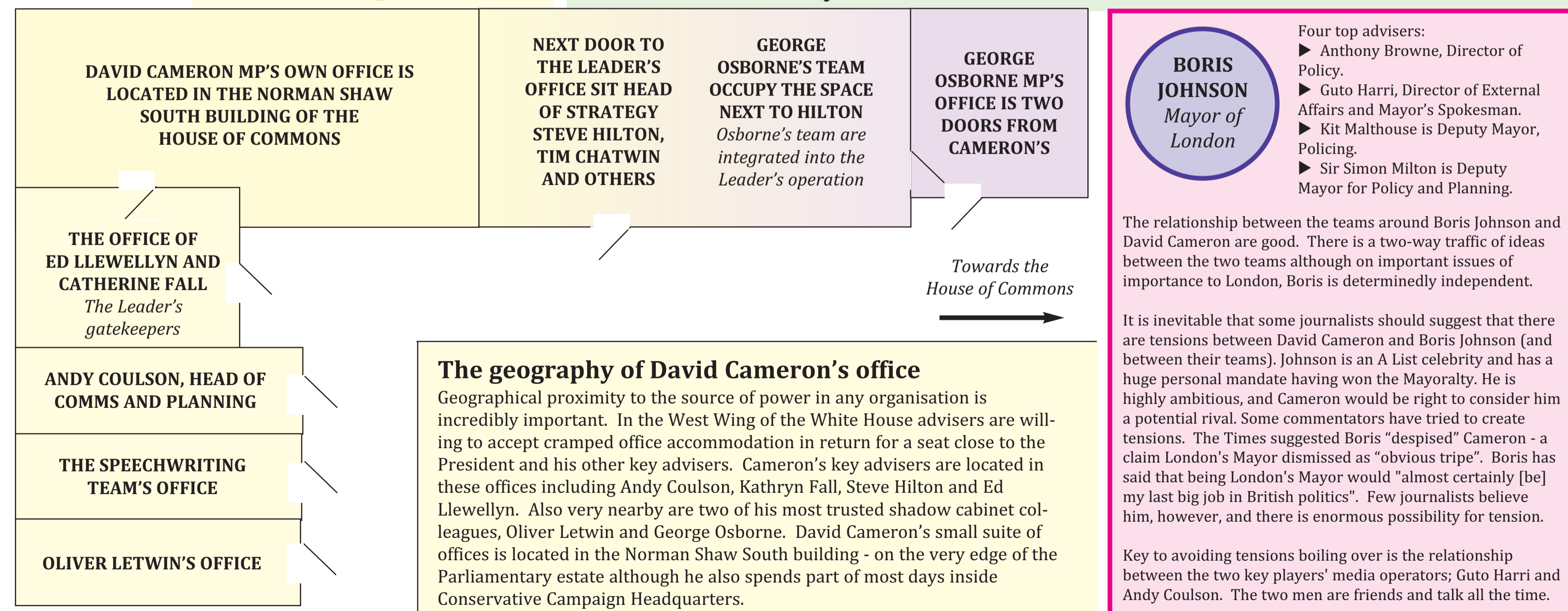
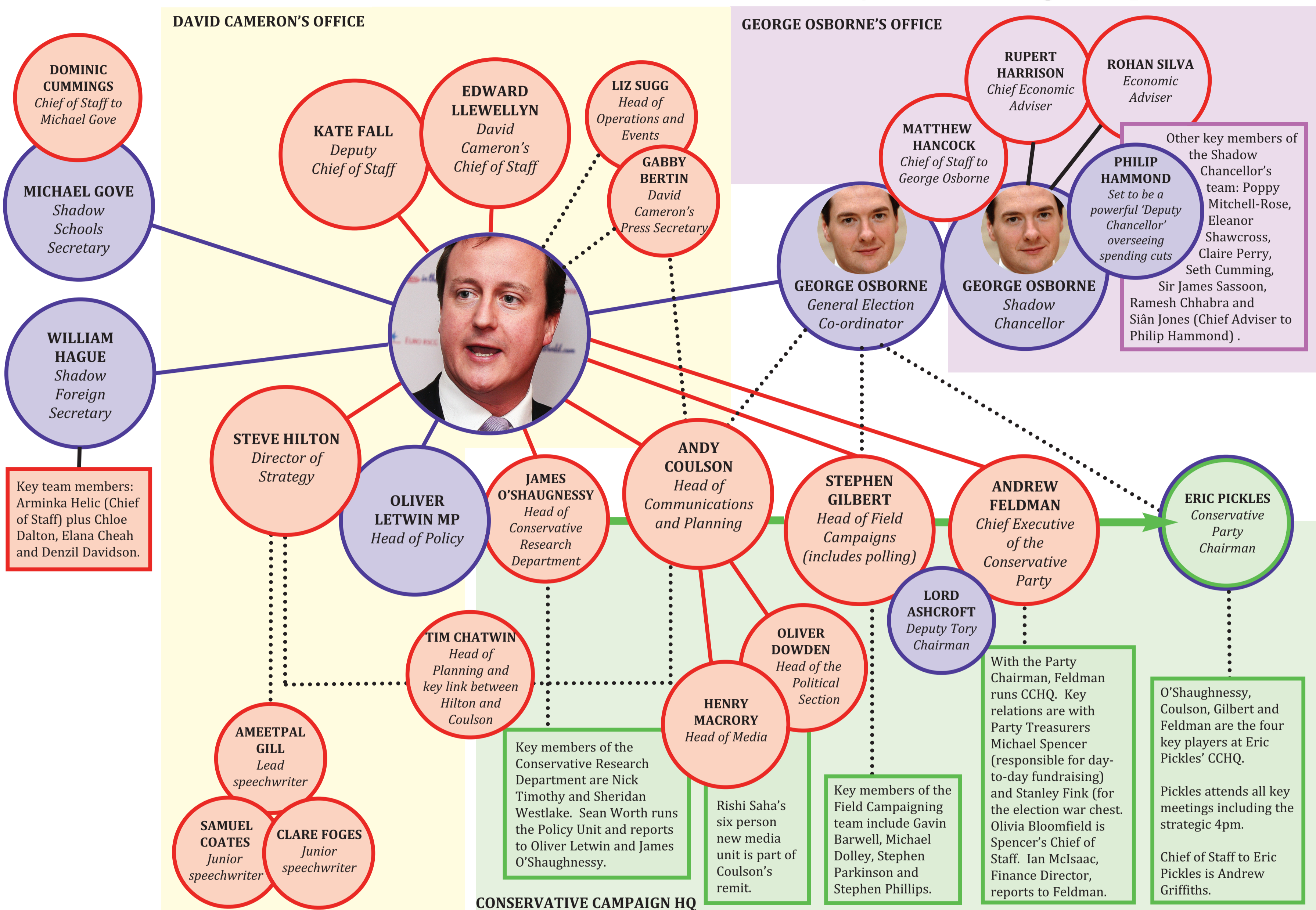
The Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ) is functioning more effectively than at any time since 1997. After years of restructuring it has reverted to a traditional three-fold structure of Field Campaigning (overseen by Stephen Gilbert), Communications (overseen by Andy Coulson) and Policy and Research (overseen by James O'Shaughnessy). Andrew Feldman, a university friend of David Cameron, became Chief Executive of the Party in another sign of the Tory leader's firm grip on the whole party machine.

Lord Ashcroft's man, Stephen Gilbert, runs CCHQ's Field Campaigning team. One of the innovations of Gilbert's era is the integration of polling and campaigning. Rather than targeting geographical clusters of seats alone there are also now battleground strategies and bespoke literature for New Towns, seaside constituencies and Con/LibDem marginals.

Andy Coulson oversees communications. His key lieutenants are Oliver Dowden and Henry Macrory. With former Cameron speechwriter Douglas Smith, Dowden runs many of the HQ's more political operations. Rishi Saha's six person new media team falls within Coulson's remit.

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The key members of the CCHQ operation sit around 'The Pod' at the heart of the War Room. The 'Pod Team' are Tim Chatwin, Andy Coulson, Oliver Dowden, Stephen Gilbert, Henry Macrory, James O'Shaughnessy and Nick Timothy.

Michael Spencer is Party Treasurer and responsible for keeping the whole day-to-day machine funded. Stanley Fink is Deputy Treasurer and is responsible for raising the £17m General Election war chest. Spencer's formidable Chief of Staff is Olivia Bloomfield.

The Implementation Team headed by Francis Maude MP and Nick Boles is at the heart of the Party's preparations for government. It may play little role in helping to secure a first Cameron victory but its contribution to producing an effective programme for government and effective individual ministers may play a big role in securing the re-election of a Conservative government.

Its early work programme gives a clue to the legislative priorities of a Conservative Government:

- ▶ Greg Clark MP (low carbon economy)
- ▶ Michael Gove MP (schools reform)
- ▶ Dominic Grieve MP (prisons reform)
- ▶ Andrew Lansley MP (health)
- ▶ Theresa May MP (welfare reform)
- ▶ Maria Miller MP and David Willetts MP (family)
- ▶ Caroline Spelman MP (decentralisation).

Project Cameron's most important decisions are taken in small groups of shadow ministers or by the inner staff team. The shadow cabinet is too large a meeting to be an effective decision-maker.

The shadow cabinet, which very occasionally meets outside of London, is useful for housekeeping, 'temperature-taking' and political presentations but does not take major decisions.

The day usually starts at 0845 when Coulson runs through the draft lines to take for the day and the planning grid with James O'Shaughnessy, Stephen Gilbert and key members of his own team, notably Gabby Bertin, Oliver Dowden, Henry Macrory, Rishi Saha and Liz Sugg.

08:45

The 0915 meeting involves the key advisers - notably Coulson, Chatwin, Gilbert, Llewellyn and O'Shaughnessy - but is joined by the politicians; David Cameron, George Osborne, Eric Pickles, Patrick McLoughlin, William Hague, Ken Clarke and Chris Grayling.

09:15

The 4pm meeting is regarded as the most significant of the leader's regular meetings. If the earlier meetings are about information gathering and sharing the 4pm is more of a decision-making body. As well as David Cameron, George Osborne and Eric Pickles it includes Andy Coulson, Steve Hilton, Kate Fall, Ed Llewellyn, James O'Shaughnessy, Stephen Gilbert, Tim Chatwin, Oliver Dowden and Matt Hancock.

16:00

Three or four hours of every week when Parliament is sitting is spent preparing for Prime Minister's Question Time. David Cameron is joined by George Osborne plus Peter Campbell, Andy Coulson, Oliver Dowden and Nick Timothy. Michael Gove and Oliver Letwin are the other senior players who regularly join the Preparation meetings. One insider describes the meeting as a key forum for developing attack strategies.

The biggest decisions are 'drafted' in very small groups, however - always before Cameron refers them to his frontbench's 'big beasts' for ratification (notably Ken Clarke as well as the other leading frontbenchers already mentioned). Osborne and Cameron are always at the centre of these small groups but, depending upon the mix of policy and politics, are often joined by Hilton, in particular, and Coulson. Llewellyn, Fall, Gove, Letwin and Hague form the next loose concentric ring around the inner 'Quartet'.

If Margaret Thatcher was most influenced by the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Centre for Policy Studies, the two most important think tanks in the Cameron era are Policy Exchange ('PX') and the Centre for Social Justice.

The new influence on politics is the blogosphere. A post on The Spectator's Coffee House blog, The Times' Comment Central (written by the close friend of George Osborne, Daniel Finkelstein), ConservativeHome.com, Iain Dale's Diary or Guido Fawkes is certain to be read and absorbed by the advisers to the Conservative Party leader and very likely by the blog-reading leader himself.

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