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On: 31 March 2014, At: 19:53

Publisher: Routledge

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Australian Journal of Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cajp20>

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Published online: 25 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Keith Dowding (2013) Presidentialisation Again: A Comment on Kefford, Australian Journal of Political Science, 48:2, 147-149, DOI: [10.1080/10361146.2013.787960](https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.787960)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.787960>

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Presidentialisation Again: A Comment on Kefford

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The Australian National University

Glenn Kefford claims that ‘some evidence of presidentialisation in all of the [Poguntke and Webb’s] three faces can be identified during the Rudd leadership period’ (Kefford 2013, 142). I have argued that the presidentialisation thesis is no more than a superficial sheen on some public behaviour, warranting comment perhaps by journalists but not by professional political scientists (Dowding 2013a, 2013b). In my original essay, I had intended a wider comparison than the one I made between the British prime minister and the president of the United States (US), but found that the nature of my argument made this impossible. My case is that specific institutions at times cause vast differences in the behaviour and power of actors, as well as in the kind of policy output, in different countries. The import of the argument is that when doing comparative politics, one needs to look at institutional differences and not behavioural similarities. Indeed, I take it that is the lesson we learned when the profession took an institutional turn several decades ago. Institutional differences matter: the same global forces operate but might have divergent effects in different systems.

I argued that the presidentialisation thesis has two aspects – behavioural and institutional. The first can be seen in terms of the personalisation of politics. The second relates to the increase in, and centralisation of, the resources of prime ministers. In both cases, I argued that this means that parliamentary systems are becoming less, not more, like presidential ones. It is true that I take the US system as the ideal type; in other presidential systems (especially semi-presidential ones) and in some parliamentary systems (especially non-Westminster ones), the issues are more complex. But you can’t have your ideal-typical cake and eat it. The ideal-typical method is to define the ideal types and then contrast them. If one ideal type is becoming more like another, it is becoming more like the latter ideal type and not like something in between the two (which would be another ideal type, for example a semi-presidential system). I prefer to use modern, institutional methods of model-building, along with assumptions about actor behaviour, believing this to be the most fruitful way of analysing the complex interactions of structure and agent.

According to Kefford, personalisation in Australian politics means that party leaders are more important in elections and can take less notice of their party structures. In other words, the electoral chances of other politicians are dependent on the success of the leader. Both the party and other candidates become less important in

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voters' choices. Hence, when Kevin Rudd was thought to be becoming a liability, he was quickly jettisoned. In a presidential system, because the elections for the president and the legislature are separate ballots, politicians can associate with their leader when the leader is popular and distance themselves when the leader is not. Personalisation in presidential systems implies, overall, more ticket-splitting across elections. It means that the personalities of both the presidential candidates and the candidates in other elections become more important.

The global force of personalisation operates differently across the different institutional types. None of Kefford's evidence of personalisation, in party or electoral faces, demonstrates presidentialisation. Despite claiming to use Poguntke and Webb's comparative method, Kefford makes no comparisons. He just assumes that the forces that led to Rudd's importance to the success of his party are evidence of presidentialisation. My argument is that they are not, and that is the argument that needs to be addressed.

Similarly, I argue that centralisation and the growing power resources of the Australian prime minister are not evidence of presidentialisation. With regard to the public service, growth in the offices of the prime minister limits the autonomy of ministers in policy formation and implementation. Presidential offices are set up to control the influence of the legislature on the implementation of policy by the public service, and to lobby and bargain with the legislature over policy formation. The two offices have completely different functions. To assume that centralisation in Australia equates with presidentialisation is to misunderstand the way in which presidential systems (note, not necessarily semi-presidential systems) operate.

Indeed, virtually every aspect of Kefford's evidence in the 'party face' points away from presidential systems. Shifting policymaking power from parties to party leaders makes the system less presidential. In the ideal-typical presidential system, the legislature, not the executive, introduces bills into the assembly (and that is part of the logic of the separation of powers). Presidents might have the power of veto, and to the extent that they are recognised as leaders of their parties and have a popular mandate and so on, they can influence the nature of those bills and at times set the agenda. In Dowding (2013a), I gave the example of Obama's health bill, which was really two bills entered into different houses of Congress, neither of which ever contained his preferred option. Obama put health care on the agenda, but it was his party members who decided the bill's final form as he negotiated from the sidelines. The policy process in Australia under Rudd, as described by Kefford, was very different. Kefford argues that prime ministers are increasingly becoming agenda-setters; yet, the main power resource of presidents is their veto power.

What Kefford does is to identify some trends in Australian politics that boil down to leaders becoming more important to the electoral success of their party. Rudd was able to dominate the process of policy formation within the party and within government, partly through the desperation of his party to win the 2007 election, and then through the resources provided by the public service. I do not quibble with any of Kefford's evidence in that regard. It is simply that none of it adds up to presidentialisation because neither he, nor Poguntke and Webb (2005; Webb, Kolodny and Poguntke 2011), have properly specified the institutional powers and behaviour of presidents. All they do is point to some superficial resemblances.

I called the effect of centralisation and personalisation on prime ministerial behaviour 'prime ministerialisation' not because I like the term, but rather as a tease. Nevertheless, however ungainly, it better covers the changes that are purportedly occurring

in the United Kingdom and Australia. Labels are important for what they imply, but what really underlies my argument is that a wealth of comparative evidence demonstrates that institutions matter. The number of veto-players affects policy stability; institutions affect the number and power of agenda-setters; principal–agent problems play out in different ways through different legislative and executive systems; electoral systems affect party systems; party organisation affects the power of leaders and members; and all affect the behaviour of actors. Thinking through political processes through these sorts of models, even when undertaking case studies, is the way forward for political scientists to understand political behaviour and institutional forms.

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