



UK Politics and Government – Prime Minister and the Executive

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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The executive is the actual government, and it consists of:

- Prime minister, also known as the **Chief Executive**.
- Cabinet ministers, also known as **Secretaries of State** and they act as the heads of government departments, about 20-25 that are appointed by the PM.
- **Junior ministers**, about 100, they support the work of cabinet ministers and responsible for specific policy areas within each department.
- **Most ministers sit in the Commons**, some junior ministers from each department also sit in the House of Lords.
- **Civil servants** support the work of ministers in their respective department; they are not party political.

Functions of the executive

- **Policy making** = government policy is advanced by the executive via proposals of legislation, that are then voted on by parliament.
- **The budget** = establishing levels of spending required for running the government business, how to raise the necessary revenue; it is led by the **Chancellor of the Exchequer**.
- **Day-to-day governance** = running the country; decisions are being made by the PM, cabinet or individual cabinet members, depending on the scope of the decision. While the government demarcates the agenda, it also responds to pressing or developing events.
Many governmental decisions do not require new legislation to implement them.

Individual ministerial responsibility

- By virtue of constitutional convention, **cabinet ministers are expected to take responsibility for their departments**, irrespective whether they are personally involved in any specific matter.
- **There are four main elements:**
 1. Ministers must be prepared to be accountable to Parliament for all policies and decisions made by their department.
 2. If a minister makes a serious error of judgment, they should resign or be required to resign.
 3. The same applies if the minister's department makes a grave error.
 4. If the minister's conduct falls below the acceptable standards pertinent to public office.
 - 2018 Amber Rudd resigned as Home Secretary over the Windrush scandal
"The Windrush scandal was a British political scandal that began in 2018. It concerned people who were wrongly detained, denied legal rights, threatened with deportation, and in at least 83 cases wrongly deported from the UK by the Home Office. The scandal saw hundreds of Caribbean immigrants living and working in the UK wrongly targeted by immigration enforcement. As a result, many elderly people were suddenly being barred from working, refused access to government services, and lost access to welfare benefits. The scandal saw thousands of UK residents most of whom were originally from the Caribbean wrongly classed as illegal immigrants. It resulted in thousands wrongly being denied healthcare, housing or the right to work or being held detained or deported by immigration officials."
 - 2002 Estelle Morris resigned as Education Secretary over missed literacy and numeracy targets.
- **The convention is neither legally nor formally enforced**, and it is handled based on individual conscience or by decision of the PM.
 - 2014 Maria Miller resigned over questions about her expenses.
 - 2012 Chris Huhne resigned over avoiding a speeding charge.
 - 2017 Priti Patel resigned over meetings with Israeli officials that were not authorised by the Foreign Office.
 - However, Theresa May 2011 did not resign over border control issues and a civil servant resigned instead.

Collective ministerial/cabinet responsibility

CMR is an unwritten convention of the constitution

- All members of government are together as one responsible for all governmental policy.
- Ministers should publicly support the government, even if privately they disagree.
- Ministers who cannot reconcile their opposition to key governmental policy with their own position, should resign.
- If a minister dissents without resigning, it is expected of the prime minister to dismiss the minister.
- It applies to all front benchers not just to cabinet ministers.
- To ensure that all ministers will support a decision that was taken by the Cabinet, or else they should resign.
 - Robin Cook, resigned over the Iraq War.
 - David Davis, resigned over the Chequers Agreement.
 - Theresa May government: 17 ministers, four of whom were cabinet members, resigned over her Brexit strategy.
- The minutes of cabinets meetings (the official record of meeting details) are not available for 30 years.
- Occasionally the convention is suspended to allow ministers to express their disagreement in public, such as during the EEC referendum of 1975 or the EU referendum of 2016.

Increasingly in recent years, ministers who disagree with the government were reluctant to resign.

The reasons that have limited CMR

- 1) In a coalition, CMR extends only to those policies that the governing parties agree on.
- 2) A specific issue may divide the cabinet; thus, it is not just the odd dissenting minister.
- 3) Referendums usually involve members of the cabinet campaigning on different and opposing sides of the policy at stake.
- 4) A prime minister who cannot command strong authority may be less inclined to dismiss dissenting ministers.
- 5) Personality clashes can force cabinet members to choose between two opposing camps.

The role of the prime minister

- Head of government, the Chief Executive.
- Head of government policy.
- Chairs cabinet, setting the agenda and chairing the meetings.
- Chief appointing officer, various patronage powers, in charge of hiring and firing.
- Chief spokesperson overseas, senior representative of the government with foreign governments.
- Chief spokesperson for the government, speaks on behalf of the government in parliament and the media.
- Exercises the royal prerogative powers, to sign treaties, declare war, etc.

The sources of powers of the PM

(1) Patronage

The power of appointment and dismissal of cabinet and junior ministers; the so-called payroll vote.

It is an important source of power because it can foster loyalty.

The PM also has a say in other public appointments, including most senior civil servants.

Benefits

1. Enabling shaping the ideological direction of the government.
2. The PM can reward loyalty.
3. The PM has the opportunity to promote younger MPs with a view to foster diversity.
4. **In appointing ministers, the PM has to consider** satisfying all factions in the party, it is safer to have potential rivals in the cabinet as they are bound by ministerial responsibility, the type of government can affect the leeway with patronage, and ministers may refuse a job.

(2) Royal prerogative

- **The UK is a constitutional monarchy** and therefore there are a number of powers that are nominally or symbolically in the hands of the monarch instead of the parliament.
- In practice, **these powers are under the control of the executive**, particularly the prime minister:
 - Declaring war.
 - Making appointments, such as to the Lords.

- Signing treaties, such as all the EU treaties.
- The power to call a general election was also a prerogative power that is held by the PM, but it was given away by Cameron in the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011.

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 set a five-year interval between ordinary general elections. General elections are scheduled to take place on the first Thursday in May in every fifth year. The act includes the mechanisms for calling for early general elections, but by default, not beyond every 5-years.

The Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 repealed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (FTPA) and made the maximum term of a Parliament (rather than the period between general elections) five years.

The last United Kingdom general election was held on Thursday, 4 July 2024.

(3) Parliamentary majority

The PM, as the leader of the largest party in the Commons, usually enjoys majority in the House. This majority plays a significant role in how the PM can shape the legislative agenda. The narrower the majority, the more challenging it becomes.

(4) Party support

The PM can rely on the support of the party and on the whip to promote discipline and obedience. However, this support cannot be taken for granted.

(5) Personal mandate

Refers to the individual authority that the PM can claim to shape the direction and nature of the government's policymaking. Personal mandate is a composite not only of the popular vote but also popularity, image and charisma.

Personal qualities of the PM can significantly affect the popularity of the government and its leader and the ability to 'do the job'. This is even more significant when divisive issues are at stake.

The role of government ministers

- Known also as secretaries of state.
- Heads of their respective department, responsible for policy and strategy, supervising the work of junior ministers and civil servants, and being the spokesperson for the area of their department with regard to parliament and the media.
- Joint responsibility for cabinet ministers for day-to-day running of the country, chaired by the PM.

Selecting ministers

- The PM appoints ministers and decides which department they will head, with the power to promote, demote or sack ministers.
- By convention, the PM aspires to appoint a balanced cabinet, including those from within the party that follow or hold some different opinions.
- Most ministers are selected from the Commons, some from the Lords and some are appointed to the Lords specifically with the purpose to become a minister.
- The PM is allowed to choose how many cabinet positions.

Cabinet government

- The UK executive was run traditionally by a cabinet government = **government by committee**.
- Decisions are being made with the PM being *primus inter pares*, **first-among-equals**.
- Cabinet meetings used to be regular, long and elaborate.
- It is argued that under Thatcher and Blair the government took a different approach.

Prime ministerial government

- In the 1960s and 1970s, cabinet members Richard Crossman and Tony Benn, in their published diaries, suggested that cabinet government was replaced by **prime ministerial government**, with dominance of the PM rather than being first-among-equals. Their suggestion was with reference to Harold Wilson.
- This idea suggested by some to be more apparent with Thatcher and Blair. Decisions are more likely to be made outside the cabinet and by a small group of advisors ('sofa government') and the cabinet is increasingly becoming a mere rubber stamp to the prime minister and its close aids.
- This style of governing is more in par with a presidential system, one that is accused of being an elective dictatorship (Lord Hailsham).

The importance of the cabinet

Government functions

- (1) **Policy formulation** = and the cabinet often sets out the government principles of the legislation.
- (2) **Dealing with crisis** = and the cabinet meets during crisis or emergency times to demonstrate a united front. During a crisis, the PM usually relies on either a small team of experts, and/or COBRA.

COBRA = Civil Contingencies Committee, convene to address matters of urgency, major disruption or national emergency. Its members vary depending on the specific circumstances. Often chaired by the PM and supported by senior ministers.

Quad = an arrangement that was specifically created by the coalition government 2010-2015 between Conservatives (David Cameron and George Osborne) and Lib-Dems (Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander), to meet regularly to discuss and agree government policy.

- (3) **Dominating parliamentary agenda** = the cabinet can act as the forum where ministers compete for parliamentary time to advance the legislation related to their department.
- (4) **Approving decisions taken elsewhere** = and the cabinet as the 'endorsing body' approving policies that were formulated in other governmental groups such as small cabinet committees.
- (5) **Settling disputes** = and the cabinet can allow secretaries of state to advocate for their policy and to foster compromises where possible and needed.

Factors affecting the influence of the cabinet

The power of the cabinet and the extent of its influence derive directly from the power and authority commanded by the PM. A strong popular PM with a majority government can exercise greater power than the cabinet and vice versa, when a weak and unpopular leader can be challenged by rivals in the cabinets.

Circumstances that affect the power of the cabinet

- (1) **Size of majority** = PMs with a substantial majority can believe it is easier and safer to disregard the cabinet. However, when there isn't a large majority, the PM is more reliant on the support of the cabinet.
- (2) **Prime ministerial preference** = the PM can exercise a particular manner of conducting the relationship with the cabinet and the ministers. For example, some PMs prefer to consult cabinet or to delegate decisions: Cameron practically gave education secretary Michael Gove a free hand in educational policies.
- (3) **Characters within the cabinet** = PMs tend to use their powers of patronage to promote loyalty, particularly in the cabinet. However, senior cabinet members can affect promotions in and to the cabinet.
- (4) **The issue and its importance** = it seems likely that the cabinet will consult more intensively when issues are of prime importance. Issues of secondary importance might be left for the PM to address and swiftly resolve.

Features of parliamentary government versus presidential government

In recent years, PMs increasingly attempted to act more like presidents by cultivating election campaigns that focus on personality and character, distancing themselves from other institutions including their own cabinet, increased reliance on special advisors, and seeking to pursue foreign policy that is independent of parliament. However, any such orientation is inherently limited by the features of a parliamentary government compared with a presidential system.

- (1) The executive is formed from the legislature (fusion of powers) compared with the strict separation in the US where members of the legislature cannot also be members of the executive.
- (2) The government cannot take action with the approval of parliament compared with the president that executes the law and is not constrained by the sovereignty of the legislature.
- (3) Scrutiny of the executive takes place inside the parliament through questions on the floor in both chambers and various committees, compared with the president that cannot be summoned by the legislature, and scrutiny takes place as much as possible outside the legislature through the media, as it does inside of it.
- (4) PMs are reliant on their parliamentary majority and their cabinet for support, compared with the president that relies on advisors and can largely ignore or bypass the cabinet.
- (5) No direct election of the PM, they are elected as an MP like every other member of the House of Commons, compared with direct election of the president while enjoying a separate mandate from those that were elected for the legislature.

Margaret Thatcher

- 1975 – elected as a Conservative party leader.
- 1979 – first elected as PM after the winter of discontent.
- 1983 – wins a landslide election.
- 1984 – miners’ strike.
- 1987 – ‘there is no such thing as society’ speech.
- 1990 – the introduction of the poll tax (Community Charge) resulted in widespread riots in London; Thatcher resigned following cabinet pressure while Michael Heseltine pursued the leadership.

Neo-Liberals and neo-Conservatives

Policies

- Monetarist economics, raising interest rates and trying to reduce inflation.
- The Housing Act 1980 allowing council tenants to buy their homes at a subsidised price.
- The Employment Act 1980, 1982 outlawing ‘secondary action’ by trade unions (striking with a separate strike out of solidarity) and ‘political strikes’, together with a number of other restrictions imposed on trade unions.
- 1981, raised taxes and cut spending during a recession; unemployment increased and inflation decreased.
- Privatisation of utilities, British Telecom 1984 and British Gas 1986.
- 1988 the Education Reform Act introducing marketisation into state education, schools as businesses.
- 1989 introducing poll tax.
 - Her first cabinet included a number of One Nation Conservatives.
 - Used patronage powers to demote or sack cabinet members to be replaced by New Right politicians.
 - Dominant, allegation of elective dictatorship.
 - Used the power to call election on 1983 and 1987 when it ‘worked’ for the party and before the end of the five-year term.
 - Signed significant treaties such as the Single European Act 1988.

Circumstances that limited her power

- Poor public image among the working class.
- Liberal and left-wing media criticised her policies.
- Sticking to advance the unpopular poll tax led to her downfall.
- In the last year of her governing the economy deteriorated.
- Opposition in her own party.

Circumstances of her downfall

Refused to back down on the poll tax; when it was feared that the party would be defeated at the 1992 election, a leadership challenge ensued and Thatcher was replaced by John Major in 1990.

“**The lady's not for turning**” was a phrase used by Margaret Thatcher, then Prime Minister, in her speech to the Conservative Party Conference on 10 October 1980. The term has thus been applied as a name to the speech in its entirety. It is considered a defining speech in Thatcher's political development, becoming something of a Thatcherite motto.

The phrase made reference to Thatcher's refusal to perform a ‘U-turn’ in response to opposition to her liberalisation of the economy, which some commentators as well as her predecessor as Conservative leader Edward Heath had urged, mainly because unemployment had risen to 2 million by the autumn of 1980 from 1.5 million the previous year and the economy was in recession, with unemployment exceeding 3 million by the time the recession ended in 1982.”

John Major

- Was elected as leader of the Conservative Party and PM in 1990, following the resignation of Thatcher.
- Gulf War in 1991.

Policies

- The Citizen’s Charter 1991 to improve access to public services.
- Council Tax in 1992 to replace the Poll Tax.
- Further privatisation including the highly controversial British Rail between 1994-1997. He continued privatisation policies initiated by Thatcher, by dismantling state-owned monopolies.
 - Considered to be less dominant than Thatcher, more cooperative in line with the style of Cabinet government.
 - Joined the Gulf War using prerogative powers.

Tony Blair

- Was elected as a Labour leader in 1994 and introduced reforms into the party known as **New Labour**.
- 1997 elected as a PM.
- 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland peace process).

- Military interventions: Iraq bombing 1998, Kosovo 1999, Sierra Leone 2000, Afghanistan 2001, Iraq War 2003.
- 2001 9/11 attack, Blair promises the UK will 'stand shoulder to shoulder' with the US.
- 2005 7/7 bombings in London, further anti-terrorist measures.
- 2006-7 'cash for honours' scandal when Blair was accused of granting honours and peerages in exchange for party donations and loans.
- 2007 Blair retired as PM and leader of the Labour when challenged by supporters of the chancellor Gordon Brown.

Moderate social democrats – Third Way/New Labour

Policies

- 1997 independence of the Bank of England.
- 1998 Devolution of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Good Friday Agreement.
- 1998 introduced a minimum wage.
- 1999 House of Lords reform.
- 2000 Freedom of Information Act.
- Reforms to public services.
- Introduced tuition fees £1000, later increased to £3000 (currently capped at £9,250).
- A number of anti-terrorism measures that stirred up much controversy: the Anti-Terrorism and Security Act 2001 was deemed to contradict the Human Rights Act and eventually was replaced by the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005.
 - Gordon Brown and continuing internal opposition.
 - Accused of bypassing cabinet in favour of a 'sofa government' with close advisors.
 - Dominant, enjoyed a large majority.

Circumstances that limited his power

- Public image was damaged in the last years of his government.
- After 2003 he faced a strong opposition from Gordon Brown who enjoyed much support.
- His reputation was tarnished significantly following the Iraq War.

Circumstances of his downfall

After the Iraq War, Blair's reputation was seriously damaged and increasing number of Labour members were supporting Gordon Brown to become the leader of the party. Blair resigned in 2007 in favour of Brown.

David Cameron

- 2005 elected as leader of the Conservative Party.
- 2010 elected as PM of a coalition government with the Lib Dems.
- 2011 riots in London that were then spread to other cities, and military intervention in Libya.
- 2014 Scottish Independence referendum.
- 2015 won the general election with a small majority, promised an in/out referendum on EU.
- 2016 'Leave' wins the EU referendum, Cameron resigned.

Social liberals – New Right economic policy

Policies

- 2010-2015 austerity measures, spending cuts to reduce the budget deficit.
- 2010-2015 significant reforms to restructure health and education ('free schools'= new academies).
- Elected police commissioners.
- 2013 Marriage Act same sex couples.
- 2016 EU referendum.
 - Without majority and then with a small one, difficult to exercise power.
 - When he was re-elected with a small majority he lost much of his ability to command authority over the controversial Europe issues. Eventually the EU referendum went against his 'Remain' position with the vote for 'Leave', and he chose to resign his premiership in June 2016.

Circumstances that limited his power

- Forced into coalition government, and his ability to command authority was eroded.
- Won a narrow parliamentary majority in 2015.
- Constant opposition from right-wing Eurosceptics within his own party.
- Introduced a programme of unpopular austerity measures.

Circumstances of his downfall

Pressure emanating from his own party and the risk of UKIP, Cameron was forced to promise a referendum on UK and EU in 2016. When the outcome was to 'Leave' he resigned.

Theresa May

- 2016 became the leader of the Conservative Party following opponents backing down.
- 2017 lost her majority in a snap election and makes a 'confidence and supply deal' with the DUP.
- 2018-19 lost a number of key votes in Parliament regarding a Brexit deal and yet survived a vote of no confidence.

Policies

- Focus on Brexit with a favourable trade deal.
 - Tried to appoint a balanced cabinet despite the divisive campaign on the 2016 referendum.
 - Faced several resignations with a cabinet plagued by divisions.
 - Despite the Fixed Term Parliamentary Act, she managed to call a snap election because of the support from opposition parties, but she lost her majority.
 - 2017 struggled to command authority and consensus, was dependent on DUP and conservative backbench groups such as the European Research Group to pass legislation.
 - 2019 July gave her final speech; she resigned after failing to command a breakthrough regarding how to lead Britain out of the EU.