

see peers pandering for votes and following the party line.

- As part of the legislation process, peers in the House of Lords would have to vote themselves out of position, which is unlikely to happen.
- Many people feel that the time and resources used trying to reform the Lords would be better used in trying to improve the lives of the British public. For example, tackling unemployment or improving living conditions.

### Added Value idea

Perhaps your assignment could be based around reforming the House of Lords.

### Show your understanding

- 1 Explain, in detail, why some consider the Lords an effective scrutiniser of government policy.
- 2 Describe, in detail, the main changes that took place in the Lords under Tony Blair's premiership.
- 3 Working with a partner, create a table in which some of proposed changes to the Lords are listed alongside the possible problems that may arise from these changes. Be prepared to share your findings with the rest of the class.

## The Executive

The UK Executive is made up of three parts as follows:

- the prime minister
- the Cabinet
- the civil service.

The Executive is the key decision-making body in the UK. It has the power, authority and legitimacy to make most of the decisions that affect all of our lives and is the main influence of the direction a country takes. This is primarily done through formulating and implementing policy. The prime minister and the Cabinet are politically motivated and partisan in their decision-making capacity – together they make up the government. The civil service is politically neutral and it is their job to advise the government and carry out their plans.

## Role of the prime minister

According to the prime minister's own website, they are head of the UK Government and are ultimately responsible for the policy and decisions of the government. The key roles are overseeing the operation of the civil service, appointing members of the Cabinet/government and being the principal government figure in the House of Commons.

A common misunderstanding is how the prime minister is selected. Unlike the president of the USA, the prime minister is not directly elected. In fact, the prime minister is chosen by the monarch, who through constitutional convention picks the person who has the support of the House of Commons; this is usually the leader of the largest political party in the Commons. It is this majority that allows the prime minister to take the lead in government. The ultimate 'check' on the power of government and the prime minister lies with ordinary MPs. If a prime minister does not have the support of the majority of the House of Commons chamber, the Commons can pass a vote of no confidence, leading to the resignation of the prime minister and the government. This happened to the minority Labour Government of James Callaghan in 1979. In the election that

followed, the Conservatives, under Margaret Thatcher, came to power. Labour did not form a government again until 1997, when Tony Blair won with a landslide victory.

## Powers of the prime minister

With the role of the prime minister comes several powers that are given in order for them to be able to lead effectively. However, some of these powers will vary depending upon a number of circumstances, many of which are out of the control of the prime minister. This was summed up by former prime minister Harold Macmillan; when asked by a journalist what he most feared he replied 'events, dear boy, events'. Given the events of June 2016, David Cameron might have agreed.

### Royal prerogative

The prime minister holds prerogative powers that afford them traditional authority. They are historic powers formally exercised by the monarch acting alone, but which now are exercised by the prime minister. They enable the leader to rule virtually by decree, without the backing of or consultation with parliament.

Some of these powers include:

- the recognition of foreign states
- the declaration of war
- the deployment of armed forces in the UK and abroad
- the making of treaties
- the accreditation of diplomats
- the appointment and dismissal of ministers
- the restructuring of government departments
- the appointment of special advisors
- the issuing and withdrawal of passports
- the granting of honours
- appointments to, and employment conditions of, the civil service
- the calling of elections.\*

\*limited by fixed-term parliaments

On an individual basis the majority of these powers are administrative but as a collective they make the prime minister the most powerful individual in office.

### Show your understanding

- 1 Describe how a prime minister is selected.
- 2 Explain what happens to the prime minister in a 'vote of no confidence'.
- 3 Outline some of the prerogative powers exercised by the prime minister.

### Sources and limitations of power

As well as the prerogative powers given to the prime minister, their position within parliament gives them a number of additional powers. What is significant about these extra powers is that they are subject to change. When describing the role of government the famous saying 'a week is a long time in politics' is used regularly and with regards to the amount of power a prime minister can yield it is particularly pertinent.

### Majority party leadership

As the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons, the prime minister usually has a majority and therefore is able to implement the proposed government legislation; however, this varies depending on general election results. The Labour leader Tony Blair commanded great power and authority in his first two terms in office from 1997 to 2005, but this ebbed away from 2005 to 2007, when he left office earlier than intended. The then Conservative leader David Cameron, in his first term from 2010 to 2015, had to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats to establish a Commons majority but lost the support of some MPs because of the compromises he made. In his most recent term he commanded a slim majority in the Commons; however, this means that he was at risk of losing power if a small number of Conservative MPs

defied the whip. Indeed it was widely rumoured that Cameron allowed the European Union referendum to take place due to pressure from a fairly small group of Conservative MPs, showing that his power was limited.

### Image and popularity

A key source of prime ministerial power is their popularity among the general public. Prime ministers attract much media attention and live with a high degree of public scrutiny as spokesperson for the government. They also provide national leadership at home and on the international stage, leading the nation in times of crisis and emergency. They sit down with other world leaders and attend high-profile meetings, such as at the G8 and EU summits. They are directly involved in foreign policy, and it is the prime minister who negotiates treaties. A popular and well-liked prime minister will have the support of the people and this will be reflected in high ratings in the polls. David Cameron consistently had higher approval ratings than other high-profile Conservatives and Opposition leaders, especially when it comes to people's perception of him as an effective leader. The key to this is that the popularity of the leader will directly affect the popularity of the party and so MPs will support a leader who is seen as an electoral asset as they stand a better chance of retaining their status as MPs in future elections.

### High-profile colleagues

In theory, the prime minister has the ability to create a Cabinet in their own image. In reality, a prime minister's power within the Cabinet is limited by a need to assuage the ambitions of party colleagues. Senior party members and those who have been loyal and show potential may expect to be included in the government regardless of their own personal political views.

The prime minister is also restricted by the pool of MPs that is available; while it is their only resource, it can also provide obstacles. Subsequently, the prime minister may be pushed into offering positions to potential rivals and opponents: these people may be less trouble inside the Cabinet, where they are bound by the convention of collective responsibility, rather than outside it on the back benches, where they could stir up dissent and be a focus for rebels should a policy be controversial.

Margaret Thatcher, Conservative prime minister from 1979 to 1990, was regarded as a strong and effective leader. Yet 'the Iron Lady', as she was known, was effectively forced out of office by her Cabinet colleagues in November 1990, thus demonstrating the limitation of the office of the prime minister. Tony Blair was regarded as an effective leader, winning three elections in a row.

Prime Minister Cameron had trouble with the right of his party in his first year in office. This was because of his support on giving some prisoners the vote, his Home Secretary's liberal views on law and order, and the cuts to the defence budget while the international aid budget was maintained. In fact, Cameron saw more of his own MPs rebel and faced more revolts in his first year in office than Tony Blair did during the whole of his first term.

Cameron brought the former Conservative leader William Hague into the Cabinet as Foreign Secretary in 2010 to shore up his own position, and then was reluctant to oust him when things started to go wrong. Mr Hague faced criticism over his handling of the crisis in Libya in 2011. Cameron also made high-profile Conservative Boris Johnson a part-time member of the Cabinet, given his power in the party and his former role as Mayor of London. Prime Minister Theresa May appointed Mr Johnson as Foreign Secretary in her first cabinet.

## Events

Several key events limited Gordon Brown's power as prime minister and eventually led to his defeat at the polls in 2010. For example, the global financial crisis, the unexpected backlash over the Gurkha resettlement issue and the damaging MPs' expenses controversies, followed by the resignations of several key Cabinet members, were just some of the events during his premiership that indicated his dwindling power and support. Under Cameron's leadership there had been a few events such as the migrant crisis and the independence and European referenda that had a draining effect on his premiership. However, some would argue that the April 2016 revelation that he profited £30,000 from a tax-haven scheme in Panama in 2009 also had a negative impact on his power. He effectively resigned from office after the June 2016 EU 'Leave' result.

## The Opposition

The 'official opposition' is the largest minority party, and its main purpose is to oppose the government of the day. This can be both a source of and a drain on prime ministerial power. As leader of the largest opposition party (Labour), Jeremy Corbyn was elected in 2015 as Opposition leader in the Commons. The leader of the Opposition picks a 'Shadow Cabinet' to follow and scrutinise the work of each government department and the policies being developed in their specific areas. A weak opposition leader can help elevate the prime minister, making them look even more statesman-like; however, as Cameron was to Gordon Brown, a strong opposition leader can weaken the image of the prime minister.

## Power of patronage

The prime minister also has the power to be involved in appointing people to important

positions outside the government. For example, they can make political nominations to the House of Lords and are allowed to approve one person for a top ecclesiastical appointment in the Church of England. They also have the key role in the 'new year's honours list' in which the monarch awards people for their service to Britain through knighthoods, MBEs and CBEs.

In December 2015 Cameron was criticised for awarding mainly Tory allies and donors in the list. Australian Lynton Crosby was awarded a knighthood for 'political service' after being the chief election strategist for Cameron during the 2010 election. Following the 'cash for honours' scandal in which Tony Blair was questioned by police and several lords were cautioned and investigated, many political commentators have suggested that this power has been weakened. For example, the Conservatives' largest ever single donor Lord Ashcroft, who is estimated to have given the party more than £8 million, abstained from any further patronage after a public spat with Cameron.

### Show your understanding

- 1 Explain the importance of a parliamentary majority for the prime minister.
- 2 What evidence is there to suggest that 'image' is important for the prime minister?
- 3 Explain why having high-profile colleagues can be both advantageous and damaging to prime ministerial power.
- 4 Describe some of the controversies surrounding the power of patronage.
- 5 'A week is a long time in politics.' To what extent may this be true in relation to prime ministerial power?

## Recent prime ministers

### Tony Blair (1997–2007)

Tony Blair led the Labour Party to a landslide victory in 1997 and 2001 giving him huge power and achieving super majorities on both occasions. He had a celebrity-like status and was often courted by the media. Famously he hosted events in Downing Street to which he invited popular actors and musicians, which enhanced his image. In addition he featured as a special guest on TV shows such as the comedy programme *The Catherine Tate Show* as part of a Comic Relief Special. However, he only managed a much reduced majority in 2005 as his popularity began to dwindle due primarily to his government's decision to invade Iraq and the subsequent failure to find any weapons of mass destruction, which had been their justification for entering the conflict. Tony Blair was seen as the first prime minister to take on a presidential style of leadership due to the importance placed on his image and his micromanagement style.



**Figure 6.6** Tony Blair with Noel Gallagher from Oasis in Downing Street

### Gordon Brown (2007–10)

Gordon Brown began his premiership with a huge disadvantage in that he had not led the party to success in a general election. Despite dealing

decisively with the banking crisis of 2008 and 2009 and being a leading voice in the G20 summit on the issue, domestically he did not receive the credit he perhaps deserved. He failed to ever have the legitimacy of the office and also came up against a charismatic opposition leader in Cameron which further damaged his image and popularity. Brown was widely disliked and lampooned at the hands of the media. His perceived lack of charisma and personality resulted in his ratings plummeting throughout 2009 and up to the election in 2010 and this resulted in a lack of support from some Labour MPs who felt he damaged their own chances of re-election.



**Figure 6.7** Gordon Brown with his family leaving Downing Street following defeat in the 2010 general election

### David Cameron (2010–16)

Cameron was dealt an unusual hand in his first term in that he was the prime minister of a coalition government. This constrained his power in several ways. He had always to consult Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on the direction of government, he had Liberal Democrat members in his Cabinet and also he had to manage disappointed members of his own party who did not want to concede points to their coalition party. Cameron was able to successfully navigate this difficult task due to his background in public relations and his role as facilitator. Following a majority win in 2015 he maintained this approach →

but had to concede his power slightly after he announced that he would not stand for a third term in 2020. Immediately after the 'Leave' victory in the EU Referendum, he announced that he would resign as prime minister following the appointment of a new leader of the Conservative Party. As such, he resigned on 13 July 2016 and Theresa May became the new Conservative leader and the new prime minister.

### Theresa May (2016–?)

Time will only tell what unique style Theresa May will bring to the office of prime minister. She began decisively by sacking George Osborne from the Chancellor of the Exchequer position and

also dismissed Michael Gove from the position of Justice Minister.



Figure 6.8 David Cameron during the 2016 EU Referendum campaign

Table 6.3 Three prime ministers compared

Blair		Brown		Cameron	
<b>Strategy</b>	Directive	<b>Strategy</b>	Indecisive	<b>Strategy</b>	Facilitator
<b>Tactics</b>	PM's office the centre of power	<b>Tactics</b>	A limited return to the Cabinet being the centre of power	<b>Tactics</b>	Stable, managerial, careful coalition management
<b>Context</b>	Large majority, weak opposition, strong economy	<b>Context</b>	Economic crisis, weak party, opposition renewal	<b>Context</b>	Coalition government, deficit reduction, weak majority, migrant crisis and Europe

Source: *Politics Review*

### Power of appointment/dismissal

The power to appoint and dismiss government ministers – especially Cabinet ministers – is arguably where most of the prime minister's regular power lies. It is the prime minister who decides which MPs to reward or punish by appointing them to specific posts and including them in or excluding them from the Cabinet. This power to 'hire or fire' includes the power to 'reshuffle' (or refresh) the make-up of the Cabinet or government whenever they deem it necessary. This can allow the prime minister to create a Cabinet of loyal supporters; however, in reality it is best to consider the selection carefully, paying close attention to people's

ambitions. If someone is overlooked for promotion they can become resentful, and it is important for the prime minister to retain the support and loyalty of all their MPs. In his memoirs Tony Blair calls those left out as the 'ejected, dejected and rejected' who eventually come to 'resent you'.

Blair was forced to include Gordon Brown in the Cabinet as Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1997 until his own resignation in 2007, and was effectively powerless to remove him. This was a tactical decision by Blair who recognised that Brown was a hugely influential figure within the party and outside of the Cabinet he could cause chaos for his leadership.

Cameron in his role as prime minister of a coalition government conceded some of this power to the Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. Clegg had sole charge over the appointments of Liberal Democrat ministers. With regards to his own Conservative ministers Cameron appointed close allies, such as George Osborne as Chancellor of the Exchequer, but also appointed more controversial figures in the party such as Dr Liam Fox as Defence Secretary. Dr Fox was seen as having far right views over issues such as Europe and so this was a tactical decision by Cameron. In addition, influential party figures such as former leaders William Hague (Foreign Secretary) and Iain Duncan Smith (Work and Pensions Secretary) were brought in to ensure party unity behind the prime minister. Following the 2015 General Election Cameron maintained much of the status quo. However, Mayor of London and political rival Boris Johnson was given a special invitation to the 'political Cabinet', meaning that he would attend some Cabinet meetings but not take a direct part in decision making. Many saw this as an attempt by Cameron to keep Johnson's backbench supporters under his control.

### Cabinet chairperson

The prime minister chairs Cabinet meetings, and in so doing has the power to set the agenda and determine what is discussed and – in some cases more importantly – what is not discussed. They also control the pace and direction of the meetings and sum up the 'sense' of what took place.

Under Tony Blair the Cabinet met infrequently. Cabinet meetings tended to be short and informal meetings to discuss the business of the day, involving round the table stock-take reports from the various government departments, which lasted no more than 40 minutes.

Under Cameron, Cabinet government rose in importance because of the need for collegiality

and consultation to make the coalition work. However, this arrangement put the convention of collective responsibility under strain as government members were forced to support policies in public that they had opposed in their manifestos. For example, Nick Clegg later admitted that he 'should have been more careful' about signing the pre-election pledge to oppose any increase in tuition fees. Cameron overcame natural divisions in the Cabinet by setting up the 'Quad' which was informal meetings between the four most influential members of the coalition Cabinet. Cameron, George Osborne, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander would meet prior to Cabinet meetings to iron out any issues that might be contentious and this was critical to ensure stability.

From 2015 Cameron had the benefit of an all-Conservative Cabinet but still had to carefully manage the various characters to ensure he remained powerful. His decision to hold a referendum on EU membership led to his resignation in 2016 after the public voted to leave.

### Show your understanding

- 1 Create detailed profiles on each of the last three prime ministers.
- 2 Explain why being Cabinet chairperson enhances the prime minister's power.
- 3 Explain the function of the 'Quad'.

### 12-mark question

Analyse the powers of the prime minister.

## The Cabinet

The Cabinet is essentially a government committee that is chaired by the prime minister. Every other member is in charge of a government department and with this position a

minister is given the title of Secretary of State, a large pay increase and huge influence over the way that the country is run. It is often seen as the pinnacle in a career in UK politics and these positions are coveted by ambitious MPs. The Cabinet meets once per week to discuss the key events that are taking place in the governance of these departments. The Cabinet is usually made up of between 20 and 25 ministers but this is at the discretion of the prime minister and they have full power over the appointments to these posts.

This group of MPs is the public face of government and so it is important to support its collective decisions. It is a case of ‘united we stand, divided we fall’: a divided Cabinet is a serious bleeding of prime ministerial power. The table in the Cabinet room is deliberately oval-shaped so that the prime minister, who sits in the centre of one of the long sides, can see the faces and body language of all the Cabinet and so spot any small signs of loyalty or dissent.

The prime minister has traditionally been referred to as *primus inter pares*, which means ‘first among equals’, and demonstrates that they are a member of the collective decision-making body of the Cabinet, rather than an individual who has powers in their own right. The prime minister is first among equals simply in recognition of the responsibility held for appointing and dismissing all the other Cabinet members. This can make ministers feel that they are beholden to the prime minister and owe them their loyalty.

The prime minister chairs the meeting and sets its agenda; they also decide who speaks around the Cabinet table and sum up at the end of each item. It is this summing up that becomes government policy, with all members being collectively responsible for all decisions and policies. The secretary of the Cabinet is responsible for preparing records of its

discussions and decisions. As the complexity of government decision making has evolved, more agents have become involved. Prime ministers are now more likely to consult with external think tanks, Cabinet committees and special advisers before making decisions. For example, the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA), which has both ministers and non-government officials, takes decisions on national security in emergency situations. This leads to the perception that the Cabinet may be less important than it once was, and is only there to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made or to present government policy and decisions.

### Collective responsibility

Collective responsibility is at the heart of Cabinet government. The Cabinet tries to reach decisions on the basis that, as members of the government, ministers are collectively responsible and have to publicly support and defend those decisions regardless of their personal opinions – or resign. This again gives the prime minister great power as any Cabinet disagreements are usually kept in-house and are not made public. However, when a Cabinet minister does resign over a disagreement with government policy it can be hugely embarrassing for the prime minister. Under Blair, Robin Cook and Clare Short resigned from the Labour Government in 2003 over the war in Iraq; meanwhile, in 2009 Communities Secretary Hazel Blears resigned after publicly criticising the government’s performance, as did Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell, who felt he could no longer publicly support Gordon Brown and called for the prime minister to stand aside.

Under Cameron there were a couple of high-profile resignations due to disagreement on policy. Baroness Warsi, who was the first ever female Muslim Cabinet minister, resigned in 2014 over disagreements with the government’s foreign



policy. She publically announced her resignation on Twitter stating that ‘with deep regret I have this morning written to the Prime Minister & tendered my resignation. I can no longer support Govt policy on #Gaza’. In March 2016, Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith resigned from the Cabinet, as he felt his position was threatened by the planned changes to disability benefits brought forward by Chancellor George Osborne in the March 2016 budget. The proposed changes were subsequently dropped. However, Cameron was largely able to successfully iron out disagreements in the Cabinet, which enhanced his reputation as a shrewd communicator. In addition, several ministers such as Liam Fox, Maria Miller and Chris Huhne have resigned over personal scandals. On the face of it this may not have limited Cameron’s power but as he appointed these ministers it reflected badly on his ability to appoint suitable ministers for the top positions in government.

Such was the division within the Conservative Party and Cabinet over the EU that David Cameron felt obliged to drop collective responsibility over this issue. Six Cabinet members, if one includes Boris Johnson, supported leaving the EU and were allowed to campaign for an exit.

### Cabinet committees

Much of the work of Cabinet is delegated to committees. These committees can reduce the burden on the Cabinet by enabling collective decisions to be made by a smaller group of ministers who are able to deal more efficiently with the large volume of government business. Often, the need for quick decision making means that it is not possible to involve the whole Cabinet in many policy decisions. Consequently, the prime minister selects a smaller group of around four or five ministers to form committees; they can come up with policies and present them to the prime minister and Cabinet more quickly.

## Individual ministerial responsibility

Individual ministerial responsibility ensures that ministers are accountable to parliament and the public for their own personal conduct and that of the department they run. This doctrine implies that ministers are ultimately accountable and should take full responsibility for their own or their department’s mistakes and resign. This is even expected of them should the mistake not be their own but that of civil servants in the department in order to maintain the anonymity of civil servants.

For example, in 2010 David Laws became the shortest-serving Cabinet member in modern British political history. The Liberal Democrat MP served as chief secretary to the Treasury for just 16 days before it was discovered that he had claimed expenses that he should not have claimed, so he resigned. He said, ‘the public is entitled to expect politicians to act with a sense of responsibility for our actions ... I do not see how I can carry out my crucial work on the budget and spending review while I have to deal with the private and public implications of recent revelations’.

### Show your understanding

- 1 Describe the main features of the Cabinet.
- 2 Explain in detail the terms ‘*primus inter pares*’ and collective responsibility.

## The civil service

The civil service helps the government of the day to develop and deliver its policies as effectively as possible. The role of the senior civil service is to offer impartial advice to ministers and inform them of the possible consequences and the potential advantages and disadvantages of their actions or decisions. Civil servants are permanent in the sense that their appointment means they cannot be removed by a dissatisfied minister or following a