Democracy in Scotland and the United Kingdom

Higher Modern Studies

**Topic 2: Representative Democracy in the United Kingdom**





**Topic 2: Representative Democracy in the United Kingdom**

This topic covers the study of representative democracy in the United Kingdom.

You will learn about:

* The role of the legislature;
* The role of political representatives and Pressures on representatives;
* The role of the executive (including Prime Minister, Cabinet, Civil Service) and
* The relationship and balance of power between legislature and executive.

**THE ROLE OF THE LEGISLATURE**

**What is the UK Parliament?**

It is where politicians meet to decide laws and make decisions for the United Kingdom.

**The three parts of Parliament:**

1 The House of Commons;
2 The House of Lords and

3 The Monarchy.

The Houses are in the Palace of Westminster in London. There are more than 1,000 rooms and more than two miles of corridors!

**What is the House of Commons?**

The House of Commons is the more powerful of Parliament's two houses.

In the 2010 General Election, 650 Members of Parliament, or MPs, were voted in by the public.

The group, or political party, with the most MPs is allowed to form a team of people who run the country - called a government. Sometimes, as was the case following the 2010 General Election, more than one party will join together to form a government. This is called a coalition and is actually very rare in the UK where majority government is far more common.

**What is the House of Lords?**

The House of Lords is Parliament's second chamber. Its main job is to 'double check' new laws to make sure they are fair and will work. There are approximately 755 members of the Lords. They are not elected. They come from many different backgrounds. The House of Lords does not have the power to stop a new law that the Commons wants, but it can delay it. It can do this because bills must go through both Houses before they become 'Acts' (laws).

**Where does the Queen fit in?**

The Queen, in theory, has the final say on whether a bill becomes law. This is because the Queen is the Head of State. What actually happens is that she accepts the advice of her government.

The House of Commons is the most important part of Parliament. This is because it is where MPs meet.

When they meet they:



* Discuss policies;
* Make decisions and
* Make new laws.

The people who are in the House of Commons are called Members of Parliament or **MPs** for short. There are currently 650 Members of Parliament. Each has a seat in the House of Commons.

Every MP has been elected by the voting public to represent an area of the country known as a **constituency**. Constituencies are sometimes called **Seats**. This means that there are 650 constituencies, one MP for each. 650 Constituencies = 650 Seats = 650 MPs

The big room where they meet is called the **Chamber** of the House of Commons. The political party which wins the majority of seats in the House of Commons (HoC) following a General Election usually form the government. If no one party has an overall majority, as was the case in 2010, a coalition government will be formed between two or more parties to ensure a majority in the House of Commons.

**House of Commons Chamber**

In the House of Commons Chamber an MP called the **Speaker** controls the debate. The Speaker makes sure everyone obeys the rules. Currently the Speaker John Bercow.

The Speaker sits on his/her own chair not a bench like everyone else. This is on a raised platform at one end of the Chamber that allows him/her to keep a careful eye on everything that is happening. During debates, the Speaker’s role is similar to that of a referee.

All the MPs from the Government Party sit on benches to the right of the Speaker and all the Opposition MPs sit on benches to the left of the Speaker. Therefore, the Government MPs and the Opposition MPs sit on benches facing each other.

The Chamber of the House of Commons looks like this:

The **Speaker** sits in the chair in the middle at the back of the chamber. The **Speaker** is the person in charge of the debate.

 **Speaker**

Lobby

Lobby



The Members of Parliament from the **losing** political parties (the **Opposition**) sit on this side of the Chamber of the House of Commons.

The Members of Parliament from the **winning** political party (the **Government**) sit on this side of the Chamber of the House of Commons.

The Leader of the biggest losing party, the **Leader of the Opposition**, sits here, opposite the Prime Minister.

The **Prime Minister** sits here.

**The Front Benchers**

The front benches in the House of Commons on either side are occupied by the Cabinet and their opposite numbers in the Shadow Cabinet. Each Cabinet member has an opposite number in the Shadow Cabinet.

**The Backbenchers**

Put quite simply, all those MPs who are neither in the Government nor the Opposition front bench sit on the back-benches on either side. Back-bench MPs who belong to the Government party sit behind the Government front benchers. Opposition back-benchers sit behind the Opposition front benchers. In theory, the ordinary, un-promoted MP has a lot of freedom to vote in order with how their conscience dictates but in reality, ordinary MPs usually vote their way their party leader wants them to.

**2010 General Election**

Conservative 307 seats

Labour 258 seats

Liberal Democrats 57 seats

Other 28 seats

The 2010 General Election was an unusual event in British politics because it produced a **coalition government.** A coalition is a government made up of more than one party. In 2010 it was the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats who formed the government. This happened because no single party had more seats than all other parties combined and so there was no overall majority. A majority was created by the two parties sharing power so that policy and laws could still be passed relatively easily.

**Task**

Produce a visual product to illustrate the role of the legislature (Parliament). This could be a poster, a mind-map, a cartoon, a story-board or any other method you can think of. It must include information about the following: ‘House of Commons’, ‘House of Lords’, ‘The role of the Monarch’, ‘The Speaker’ and ‘Front Benchers and Back Benchers’.

**THE ROLE OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES AND PRESSURES ON REPRESENTATIVES**

### Working in Parliament

When Parliament is sitting (meeting), Members of Parliament (MPs) generally spend their time working in the House of Commons. This can include raising issues affecting their constituents, attending debates and voting on new laws. Most MPs are also members of committees, which look at issues in detail, from government policy and new laws, to wider topics like human rights.

### Working in their constituency

In their constituency, MPs often hold a 'surgery' in their office or a local public building like a community centre, where local people can come along to discuss any matters that concern them. MPs also attend functions, visit schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people as possible. This gives MPs further insight and context into issues they may discuss when they return to Westminster.

Once elected, the job of an MP is to represent the people of his or her constituency (constituents) in Parliament, whether or not they voted for him or her. You only have one MP so even if you voted for one of the other candidates and you disagree with the views of your MP's party, your MP is still there to help you with all matters for which Parliament or central government is responsible.

**Meeting your MP**

When the House of Commons is sitting, you will be allowed access to the Central Lobby to see your MP. It is best to make an appointment before doing so, however, as your MP might have other appointments or engagements elsewhere and not be available to see you. The majority of MPs have times when they are available at different places within their constituency for constituents to meet and discuss problems with them. These sessions are often called surgeries and details are usually advertised in local papers and public libraries.

**What can your MP do to help you?**

Many people think that their MP is there to solve all their problems for them but this is not the case. MPs are there to help only with those matters for which Parliament or central government is responsible. In England, if your problem is not local in nature (such as council tax, or local social services, or day-to-day problems in schools) but instead concerns central government policies (such as the National Health Service, HM Revenue and Customs who collect the bulk of tax and pay child benefit and tax credits, and the Department of Work and Pensions who deal with issues such as benefits, pensions and national insurance) then you should contact your Member of Parliament.

In Scotland, there are a large number of areas which have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 1998. Members of the Scottish Parliament have the responsibilities for legislating in those areas. They would, therefore, be best placed to listen to problems connected to these matters and potentially offer solutions. Once again, local problems should be taken to local councillors but those relating to, for example, health service issues should be taken to MSPs rather than MPs.

Your MP is not there to help you in private disputes with neighbours, with an employer, with family matters or with companies who have sold you faulty goods; nor can they interfere with decisions made by courts. Constituents often take a problem to their MP because they do not know who else could help them. MPs are very generous at giving help and advice and will often have a local councillor at their constituency surgeries to help those constituents whose problems are connected with the services provided by local authorities such as dustbins, housing repairs or public lavatories.

Your MP will try to be as helpful as he or she can but, since he or she has around 68,500 constituents to look after and his or her Parliamentary duties to attend to, this will place limits on the amount of time which can be spent in the constituency. It is then important that they spend their time dealing with problems that relate to them, rather than diverting queries that should have been taken elsewhere.

**How does your MP deal with your problems?**

Where your problem does require that you contact your MP, there are a number of methods available to try to resolve the matter:

• A letter from your MP to the relevant department or official will often provide a solution;

• Your MP may decide to take matters a stage further by writing to the Minister involved or

• Your MP may make an appointment to see the Minister personally.

Many constituents' problems can be solved in this way but not all problems, of course, have an easy solution. The Minister may not be able to give the answer that you wanted to hear but if the decision has been made in the right way, there may be little that can be done.

**Raising matters in the House**

All of the methods discussed so far allow problems to be kept confidential. If your MP is not satisfied with the answers received, he or she may feel that there is something to be gained by making the matter public and may want to raise the issue in the House of Commons in front of the press and public. There are a number of occasions when your MP may have the chance to do this:

**Oral Questions** - The most popular is for your MP to ask the Minister an oral question at Question Time one afternoon. Ministers answer questions at the despatch box on a rota basis and there is a limit to the number of questions which there will be time to ask, so this cannot necessarily be done on a given day. Similarly, your MP can table a written question to the appropriate Government department. The answers to these questions are then published in Hansard.

**Adjournment Debates** - Your MP may also try to raise your problem in the half-hour Adjournment Debate, usually the last business of the day, although, again, there will be competition amongst MPs for the right to raise matters and your MP must be successful in a ballot or have his or her subject chosen by the Speaker.

**Early Day Motions** - At other times, your MP may prefer to draw attention to the matter by what is called an Early Day Motion. Although EDMs are very rarely debated, your MP will have placed on record his or her opinion on a subject and is able to gauge the support of his or her fellow MPs .

**Private Members’ Bill** - If your MP becomes aware that your problem is a common one then he or she may try to gain the opportunity to introduce a Private Member's Bill. Only a very few such measures are successful but, once again, publicity is drawn to the matter and the Minister may be persuaded to make changes in the future.

These methods can all produce results and sometimes the publicity may be helpful in persuading a Minister to change his or her mind.

**Petitions -** If you and other people feel strongly about a certain issue, you may decide to organise a petition to the House of Commons. Your petition can only be presented by an MP and must be arranged in a particular format

**Campaigns and lobbying -** MPs are often contacted by constituents campaigning on behalf of a particular cause, perhaps representing an organised pressure group. It will be for your MP to decide whether to take any action. Anyone who is intending to organise a 'mass lobby' to the House of Commons must contact the Sergeant at Arms Department in advance.

Your MP will generally do everything he or she can to help constituents but will not feel able to support every cause nor will he or she, be able to get the desired solution to every individual problem. Members may not be willing to support one constituent if in doing so they will deprive another. At times a constituent's demands may conflict with party policy and your MP will have to decide where their first loyalty should lie. The Member may think that, in any case, a majority of constituents would support the party policy - after all that is likely to be one of the reasons why they elected him or her.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

MPs are thought to be able to effectively represent their constituents to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways MPs are thought to be able to effectively represent their constituents.
* Analyse the extent to which MPs can effectively represent their constituents.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways MPs are thought to be able to effectively represent their constituents.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which MPs can effectively represent their constituents.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance

**ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE**

**Prime Minister**

As the role of government has grown, so have the powers of the Prime Minister (PM). The power is based upon the PM’s dual position as head of the Government and as the leader of the largest party in Parliament and election winner.

The Prime Minister now has considerably more power than any other Cabinet colleagues compared with their relative positions in the past. The phrase **first amongst equals** was used to describe the position of the Prime Minister, but this now fails to recognise the additional powers held by the PM. The role and power of the PM are not based on formal constitutional powers but are largely based on conventions that have built up over the years and also upon the style and personality of the holder of the position. It has been suggested that the PM has become more presidential in power, meaning that the PM has much greater personal authority and the influence of the Cabinet in making decisions has declined, though this could be argued to be less the case in coalition governments, such as that formed after the General Election of 2010.

**Powers of the Prime Minister**

* The PM is the head of the Executive. The Prime Minister is ultimately responsible for government decisions, and is in overall charge of The Civil Service. The PM oversees Government policy playing the major role in deciding Government priorities.
* The PM is the leader of their party and the main representative of the party to the public and the electorate.
* The PM has considerable powers of appointment. The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet Ministers (in conjunction with the Deputy Prime Minister when there is a coalition), and will promote or demote members of the Cabinet and other Government ministers in ministerial reshuffles. As well as these offices of government, the PM is responsible for other pubic appointments including senior judges, some university posts, and other public bodies. The PM also influences the honours system.
* The PM is the main figure in Parliament, where they lead the largest party and speak on behalf of the Government, principally at the weekly Prime Ministers Questions. Although not the Head of State, the PM is the principal representative of the country in meetings and negotiations with foreign leaders. Summit meetings with other world leaders give the PM a major role in foreign affairs.

**Greater Power than Other Cabinet Members**

The historical view of the British executive was that of collective or Cabinet government and that the PM was merely the first amongst equals. This is no longer the case and the power of the Prime Minister has increased at the expense of Cabinet colleagues.

* The Prime Minister has the power to appoint, sack and reshuffle the Cabinet in order to get the Cabinet that they want (in co-operation with the Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition). Rivals and enemies can be side-lined or sacked and supporters promoted to influential positions.
* The Prime Minister has own staff and political advisors. This makes the Prime Minister less dependent upon advice from ministers. Ministers tend to be fully occupied with running their own departments, leaving the Prime Minister (and, arguably, the Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition) as the only member(s) of Government with an overall view of Government policy and direction.
* The principle of collective responsibility, where all Cabinet members are expected to show public support for Government policies, irrespective of their own personal views, should give the impression of unity behind the Prime Minister (although less so in a coalition government).
* The Prime Minister has become the main focus of the media. This tends to emphasise the role of the individual as being the main representative of the Government and Government policy. The increased foreign policy role of the Prime Minister has increased this media focus.
* As leader of the winning party in the election the party leader will have the goodwill of much of the party. The whips in Parliament aim ensure the leader has the support of the backbenchers, many of whom will owe their election to the success of the party leader.

**Limits on the Power of the Prime Minister**

Although the powers of the British Prime Minster have increased over recent years, there are still restrictions on their powers.

* Any Prime Minister needs to retain the support of their Parliamentary and Cabinet colleagues. Even three-time election winner, Margaret Thatcher, had to resign after she lost the support of her Cabinet in 1990.
* Ultimately the fate of a Prime Minister will be determined by voters. If sufficient voters turn against the Prime Minister and their party in the election then they will lose office. If the party perceive that the Prime Minister has become an electoral liability then they may choose to change the leader before the election in order to increase their chance of success.
* Major policy disagreements can weaken a Prime Minister. High profile resignations from the Cabinet over policy issues can seriously weaken the authority of the Prime Minister. Frequent large-scale backbench revolts will also weaken the power of the Prime Minister. Controversial and unpopular policies such as British involvement in the invasion of Iraq caused major difficulties for Tony Blair while he was Prime Minister.
* Although the PM has the power to pick their Cabinet (along with the Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition), they may have to compromise over the selections. It may be necessary, in the interests of party unity, to pick rivals. Different wings of the party may have to have representation in order to prevent splits. Some ministers may be appointed because of their ability to run large and complex departments whether or not they are supporters of the PM. The ability of the PM to shape the Cabinet can also be affected if a minister refuses to accept a particular post.
* The media attention on the PM can be described as a double edged sword. If the attention is positive, then the power and status of the PM will be enhanced. However, if the media image is negative, a daily diet of unflattering photos and stories which show the PM in a bad light will weaken their authority.
* In a coalition government, such as the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat one that came to office in 2010, the Prime Minister can only proceed on the basis of agreement with his Deputy (the leader of the smaller party in the coalition). Without this, the Prime Minister may not have a majority in parliament and may not win a vote. Ignoring the junior coalition partner’s views also risks the ending of the coalition agreement, and, possibly, bringing down the Government. A coalition also proceeds on the basis of a coalition agreement, which is a series of policies and agreements the two parties have agreed to pursue during their time in office together.

**Homework Task**

Using the internet (BBC site is useful), newspapers or TV news broadcasts, find recent examples of high profile events involving the Prime Minister.

**Some Prime Ministerial Styles**

**Margaret Thatcher (Conservative 1979 – 1990)**

* Most dominant PM in recent history.
* Only female PM so far.
* Won 3 elections with large majorities.
* Chose Cabinet members to support her own views.
* Reduced the importance of collective Cabinet decision making.
* Consulted own advisors rather than taking departmental advice.
* Insisted on pushing through unpopular policies against advice of colleagues.
* Seen as autocratic and dogmatic (If someone is autocratic they exercise complete power and make decisions without consulting others. If someone is dogmatic, they follow a rigid set of principles regardless of other people’s opinions).

**John Major (Conservative 1990 – 1997)**

* Greater use of the Cabinet.
* Greater mix of opinions represented in the Cabinet.
* More emphasis on consensus and collegiality.
* Won one election in 1992 with a small majority.
* Faced frequent policy disagreements within party especially over Europe.
* Government perceived as weak, directionless and divided.
* Major seen as boring, weak and not in control of party.
* Defeated in election in 1997 after splits in policy and allegations of sleaze in the party.

**Tony Blair (Labour 1997-2007)**

* Won landslide victory in 1997 after forcing major reforms through Labour Party.
* Reduced length and frequency of Cabinet meetings.
* Major emphasis of excessive control over party and spin.
* Gave considerable power to Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown in economic policy.
* Led party to second major victory in 2001 and again with reduced majority in 2005.
* Began to lose support of party members and backbench MPs after decision to support US-led invasion of Iraq and controversial policy decisions on education and health.
* Announced in 2005 he would step down before next election.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

The British Prime Minister is thought to be able to exercise power to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the Prime Minister is thought to be able to exercise power.
* Analyse the extent to which the Prime Minister can effectively exercise power.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the Prime Minister is thought to be able to exercise power.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which the Prime Minister can effectively exercise power.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance

**The Cabinet**

The **Cabinet** is a formal body composed of the most senior [government](/wiki/Her_Majesty%27s_Government) [ministers](/wiki/Minister_%28government%29), usually of approximately 20-24 members of the Government, chosen by the [Prime Minister](/wiki/Prime_Minister_of_the_United_Kingdom) (along with the Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition). Most members are heads of [government departments](/wiki/Departments_of_the_United_Kingdom_Government) with the title "[Secretary of State](/wiki/Secretary_of_State_%28United_Kingdom%29)". Formal members of the [Cabinet](/wiki/Cabinet) are drawn exclusively from the [House of Commons](/wiki/British_House_of_Commons) and the [House of Lords](/wiki/House_of_Lords). Members of the Cabinet are required to be accountable for their actions to Parliament, so they must be members of the Commons or Lords.

In traditional constitutional theory, in the [British system of government](/wiki/Westminster_system), the Cabinet is the key formal decision making body of the [executive](/wiki/Executive_%28government%29). The political and decision-making authority of the Cabinet has been gradually reduced over the last several decades with some claiming its role has been usurped by a 'Prime-Ministerial' (i.e. more 'presidential') government. This ‘presidential’ role has, arguably, been lessened by a coalition government being elected in 2010.

**Composition**

The [Prime Minister](/wiki/Prime_Minister_of_the_United_Kingdom) uses [royal prerogative](/wiki/Royal_prerogative) powers of patronage (this means s/he can appoint and dismiss members of the Cabinet) and therefore requires the formal approval of the [monarch](/wiki/British_monarch) for any appointment to the Cabinet.

Any change to the composition of the Cabinet involving more than one appointment is customarily referred to as a [**reshuffle**](/wiki/Cabinet_shuffle). The total number of ministers allowed to be paid as "Cabinet ministers" (22) is governed by [statute](/wiki/Statute) ([Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975](/w/index.php?title=Ministerial_and_Other_Salaries_Act_1975&action=edit)), and this has caused successive Prime Ministers problems, and accounts for some of the unusual regular attendees at Cabinet, who are not paid as "Cabinet Ministers". The numbers often fluctuate between 21 and 24.

The Cabinet has always been led by the [Prime Minister](/wiki/British_Prime_Minister), although the role of the Prime Minister is traditionally described as [***primus inter pares***](/wiki/Primus_inter_pares), first among equals, though clearly this is a nominal status rather than a reality—after all, it is the Prime Minister alone (along with the Deputy First Minister, Nick Clegg in the current coalition government) who appoints/dismisses Cabinet Ministers and sets the agenda for Cabinet individually and through the [Cabinet Secretary](/wiki/Cabinet_Secretary).

**Main Roles of the Cabinet**

- Propose legislation.

-Formulation of policy (formulation of exact guidelines of these controversial new laws).

-Supervise the administration of policy.

-Discussion amongst cabinet colleagues of government policy.

-Implementation of manifesto commitments (or the plan laid out in the coalition agreement in the case of more than one party being in office).

-Coordinate policies of different departments.

-Try and reach agreements in disputes between departments.

The Cabinet decides what the priorities are for each legislative session. A session lasts about a year, usually starting around November. The Parliamentary timetable has room for only a limited number of major Bills in each session, generally about 15-20.

The Cabinet has to balance manifesto commitments (and the plans laid out in the coalition agreement, when two parties are in government), the demands of individual government departments and other priorities. Once the decision has been taken to go ahead with a particular proposal, the next step of writing the Bill can begin.

The Cabinet is chaired by the Prime Minister, who controls the agenda and following a discussion, will sum up the mood of the meeting. Once a decision has been made, Cabinet members must publicly support the decision. This concept is known as **collective responsibility**.

**Collective Responsibility**

Decisions of the Cabinet are binding on all members of the Government. A public display of unity must be maintained by all members of the Cabinet or they must resign from their Cabinet position. Claire Short and the late Robin Cook resigned from the Cabinet over the Governments policy on Iraq.

**Ministerial Responsibility**

Individual ministerial responsibility is the convention that in their capacity as head of department, a minister is responsible for the actions, and therefore the failings too, of their department. Therefore, the minister is responsible for all actions and decisions within their department. In the past this was interpreted as meaning not only was the minister accountable to Parliament but that the mistakes made by civil servants could lead to the resignation of ministers. This is because the [civil service](/wiki/Civil_service) is permanent and anonymous. Under circumstances of gross incompetence in their department a minister 'must' resign. Perhaps surprisingly, this is relatively rare in practice, although frequent policy failures may lead to hostile press coverage and a loss of confidence in a minister.

Charles Clarke was sacked from his job as Home Secretary in May 2006. This was as a result of criticism in the media over the release of more than 1000 foreign prisoners who were not considered for deportation. He was subsequently offered other posts in the Cabinet but refused them as it was rumoured that he was angry at being dismissed from his position, his successor, the now retired Dr John Reid, suffered a torrent of criticism from Mr Clarke while in post.

**Cabinet Committees**

Much of the work of Cabinet is delegated to Committees. It has been put forward that the greater use of such committees has led to an increase in the Power of the Prime Minister, since it is they (and the Deputy PM in a coalition) who choose the members of committees and discussion is increasingly compartmentalised (divided up or separated).

**Powers of Cabinet**

The Cabinet has no legal powers, they are held by Secretaries of State. But it has collective responsibility to Parliament so all members are bound to support Cabinet decisions even if they were not present.

**Cabinet Secretariat (Part of the Cabinet Office)**

The Secretariat calls meetings, circulates papers, prepares the agenda (under the PM's direction), writes and circulates the conclusions and keeps them.

The Cabinet has numerous [sub-committees](/wiki/Committee) which focus on particular policy areas, particularly ones which cut across several ministerial responsibilities, and therefore need coordination. These may be permanent committees or set up for a short duration to look at particular issues ("[ad hoc](/wiki/Ad_hoc) committees"). [Junior Ministers](/wiki/Junior_Minister) are also often members of these committees, in addition to Secretaries of State. The transaction of government business through meetings of the Cabinet and its many committees is administered by a small secretariat within the [Cabinet Office](/wiki/Cabinet_Office).

**The Cabinet Office**

The Cabinet Office is the Civil Service department set up to serve the Cabinet. At the top is the Cabinet Secretary, Britain’s most senior civil servant who, along with about 40 other senior civil servants, is in regular contact with the PM’s office in Downing Street. The role of the Cabinet Office, which has approximately 1500 civil servants in it, is to timetable meetings, prepare agenda and documents, circulate minutes and service the Cabinet committees.

In practice, and increasingly in recent years, weekly meetings of the full Cabinet have tended to be more concerned with the exchange of information and ratification of decisions, major decisions being taken by Cabinet Committees or in informal groups, often bi-laterals between the Prime Minister and an individual minister.

Most Prime Ministers have had a so-called "kitchen cabinet" consisting of their own trusted advisers who may be Cabinet members but are often trusted personal advisers on their own staff. In recent governments (generally from [Margaret Thatcher](/wiki/Margaret_Thatcher) on), and especially in that of [Tony Blair](/wiki/Tony_Blair), it has been reported that many, or even all major decisions have been said to have be made before cabinet meetings.

**Shadow Cabinet**

The [Official Opposition](/wiki/Official_Opposition_%28UK%29) (the party with the second largest number of elected members of Parliament, currently the [Labour Party](/wiki/Conservative_Party_%28UK%29)) is headed by a similar group called the Shadow Cabinet. The opposition front benches, opposite the Cabinet, is where the Shadow Cabinet sits. It is the job of the Shadow Cabinet to keep the Cabinet ‘on their toes’.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

The Cabinet is thought to be an important part of the decision making process in UK government to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the Cabinet is thought to be an important part of the decision making process in UK government.
* Analyse the extent to which the Cabinet is an important part of the decision making process in UK government.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the Cabinet is thought to be an important part of the decision making process in UK government.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which the Cabinet is an important part of the decision making process in UK government.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance

**The Civil Service**

Senior civil servants are the men and women in all the top Departments of State, such as the Treasury, the Department of Health and the Foreign Office. They are full time, experienced and highly paid professionals, who do all the important tasks required for the functioning of these Departments. They are on hand to provide information and advice to the Ministers.

Traditionally, the appointments of senior civil servants are not political. They are expert professionals who are expected to serve Ministers of any political party, giving information and advice of the highest quality. When there is a general election and a change of party in power, the senior civil servants are expected to accept the new government's policies and adapt to meet them. They must be politically neutral and impartial.

Senior Civil Servants cannot become involved in any form of political activity and they must not express their opinions publicly, they are well advised not to do so privately either as these may be liable to be leaked. They sign the Official Secrets Act when they take up their appointment and must not divulge any information related to the job.

The Civil Service is the permanent staff of the Government. It is neutral and non-political. Governments may change after elections and ministers may be reshuffled, demoted or sacked, but the civil servants remain in their positions to work with the new ministers.

Following a Cabinet 'reshuffle', when the Prime Minister changes the Ministers in his Cabinet, or moves them to different jobs, civil servants will be expected to be as loyal to the new Minister as they were to the previous one and to keep them informed of all important departmental matters. They will prepare papers on policy, spending and planning in line with government policy. The new Minister is then free to accept or adapt these papers. Civil servants will also research information, which the Minister might need during parliamentary 'Question Time'.

Although Ministers understand and often set the government policy for their departments, it is civil servants who know how the department actually works and they are expected to guide Ministers. However, it is possible that civil servants are not always completely neutral and may try to interfere in government policies. On some occasions they have been accused of being too secretive or being politically motivated, not giving Ministers important information, or trying to get their own views taken into account.

There are different ways of describing the relationship between Ministers and senior civil servants in the UK system of government:

* Constitutional model - where civil servants are neutral and impartial , offer advice when asked and implement policies dictated by their political masters without asking questions;
* Adversarial model - where civil servants and ministers are in conflict, ministers want to implement change but civil servants want to maintain the status quo;
* Village life model - where civil servants and ministers work in harmony. The Ministers create policies and civil servants have the experience to implement them effectively and
* Bureaucratic expansion model - civil servants want to increase their own power.



The role of the Civil Service has three aspects:

* Giving policy advice to ministers - this has been the role of the most senior civil servants (often known as mandarins);
* Day-to-day management of departments - ministers have overall responsibility for the work of government departments, but officials carry out the administrative functions and
* Implementing policy and delivering services.

The role of policy advisor is a controversial issue, Civil servants are required to be non-party political and provide impartial advice to whatever party leads the Government. Civil servants should be appointed and promoted on the basis of fair appointment procedures and on merit, not on the basis of political patronage.

In addition to civil service advisors, the PM and other ministers can appoint their own special advisors. However, the increase in their number and the greater visibility of some of these advisors has led to concerns about the relationship between special advisors appointed by politicians and senior civil servants.

Concerns over the politicization of the Civil Service are not new. Thatcher took a very close interest in the appointment of senior officials, aiming to ensure that people who were appointed would not hamper her own political agendas. Under New Labour, the doubling of the number of special advisors in government and the growth of the PM’s own office increased the concerns.

Special advisors tend to be of two types, concerned either mainly with policy matters or with getting across the government’s message to the public and media. These are the so-called **spin-doctors**.

Concern has been expressed that the career civil servants have been expected to carry out political tasks such as presenting information in a way that would give political support to the governing party. It has been suggested that this occurred in the lead up to the Iraq War, although the Government and the Civil Service were cleared of this charge by the Butler Report 2004.

A further concern was over the blurring of roles of political advisors and senior civil servants, particularly in the case of Tony Blair’s Press Secretary, Alistair Campbell and Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell. Both were appointed as temporary civil servants into posts traditionally held by career civil servants and were given powers to give orders to civil servants.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

The UK Civil Service is thought to be non-political to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the UK Civil Service is thought to be non-political.
* Analyse the extent to which the UK Civil Service is non-political.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways the UK Civil Service is thought to be non-political.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which the UK Civil Service is non-political.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance

**RELATIONSHIP AND BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN LEGISLATURE AND EXECUTIVE**

Two key constitutional conventions regarding the accountability of the Cabinet to [Parliament](/wiki/British_House_of_Commons) exist - collective cabinet responsibility and individual ministerial responsibility. These are derived from the fact the members of the Cabinet are Members of Parliament, and therefore accountable to it because Parliament is [sovereign](/wiki/Parliamentary_sovereignty). [Cabinet collective responsibility](/wiki/Cabinet_collective_responsibility) means that members of the cabinet make decisions collectively and are therefore responsible for the consequences of these decisions collectively. Therefore, when a [vote of no confidence](/wiki/Vote_of_no_confidence) is passed in Parliament, every minister and government official drawn from Parliament is expected to resign from the executive. So, logically, cabinet ministers who disagree with major decisions are expected to resign, as [Robin Cook](/wiki/Robin_Cook) did over the decision to attack [Iraq](/wiki/Iraq) in 2003.

Questions can be tabled for Cabinet ministers in either houses of Parliament, which can either be for written or oral reply. Cabinet ministers must answer them, either themselves or through a deputy. Written answers, which are usually more specific and detailed than oral questions are usually written by a [civil servant](/wiki/Civil_servant). Answers to written and oral questions are published in [Hansard](/wiki/Hansard).

Parliament cannot dismiss individual ministers (though members may of course call for their resignation) but the House of Commons is able to determine the fate of the entire Government. If a [vote of no confidence](/wiki/Vote_of_no_confidence) in the Government passes, then the Queen will seek to restore confidence either by dissolution of Parliament and the election of a new one or by the acceptance of the resignation of her entire government collectively.

In the United Kingdom's parliamentary system, the [executive](/wiki/Executive_%28government%29) is not separate from the [legislature](/wiki/Legislature), since Cabinet members are drawn from Parliament. Moreover the executive tends to dominate the legislature for several reasons:

* The [first-past-the-post](/wiki/First-past-the-post) [voting system](/wiki/Voting_system) (which tends to give a large majority to the governing party, though not since 2010);
* The power of the [Government Whips](/wiki/Whip_%28politics%29) (whose role is to ensure party members vote in accordance with an agreed line) and
* The "[payroll vote](/wiki/Payroll_vote)" (a term which refers to the fact that members of the governing party who are on the government payroll (e.g. as junior ministers) would be dismissed if they voted against the government).

**Government Whips**



Each party in Parliament has a team of MPs who act as **whips**. Whips are a bit like school prefects. They:

* Tell MPs what is happening in Parliament;
* Make sure that MPs turn up to vote on time;
* Make sure that MPs obey their Party’s rules and
* Make sure that MPs vote the way that their Party wants them to.

The word whip is thought to come from a term used in fox hunting. This is **‘whippers in’**. This is the term given to the riders at the back of the pack of hounds chasing the fox. They crack their whips in order to keep any straying dogs in line. They whip them into line.

The Prime Minister wants to keep all his MPs in line. He wants them to do what he tells them to and to vote the way that he wants them to. This is called following the party line.

Sometimes some MPs do **not** follow the party line because they do not agree with it. They also do not want to vote in the way the Prime Minister wants them to vote because they think it will not be good for the people in their constituency.

**What Whips do**

If MPs really do not want to vote in the way that their party leader wants, they can **abstain**. This means that they **do not vote** at all. They can also vote against their party. Those who do this are called **rebels**. This is because they rebel against their own party. They are not following the party line. If they do this they can be disciplined by the whips. This means that they are whipped back into line.

* The whips may not tell them what is happening in the House of Commons.
* They can get **deselected**. This means that the next time there is a General Election they will not be allowed to stand for their political party.

An example of when lots of MPs voted against the Government was over the war in Iraq in 2003.

Under the British system, all Government Ministers and members of the House of Lords are responsible to Parliament for their performance as ministers. The function of Parliament is to scrutinise the Government and its Ministers and call them to account for their action (or inaction).

#### Motions of No Confidence

Parliamentary control of the Government is ultimately exercised by the ability of the House of Commons to force the Government to resign. This may happen if a resolution of 'no confidence' is passed or if a proposal which the Government considers so vital to its policy that it has made it a matter of confidence is rejected.

The ultimate power that Parliament has over the Government is a **vote of no confidence**. It is rare for such a vote to be called. The last time a Government lost such a vote was in 1979. If a Government loses a vote of no confidence in Parliament, the PM would be obliged for Parliament to be dissolved and a General Election held.

The Opposition's ability to defeat the Government in a vote of 'no confidence' depends on the relative voting strengths in the Commons. Where the Government has a comfortable majority such a motion is very unlikely to succeed. There are also dangers for the Opposition in that no confidence motions tend to unite the ruling party. Consequently, such motions are relatively infrequent. Successful motions are even rarer.

The last successful no confidence motion was in March 1979 when the Opposition motion was passed by just one vote - 311 to 310. Parliament was then dissolved in April and the General Election took place.

**The Opposition in Parliament**

Her Majesty’s Opposition is made up of the MPs of the party with the second largest number of seats following a General Election. The role of the Opposition is to ensure that the policies of the Government are subjected to constant challenge and to make the Government accountable for its actions. This is an official role of Parliament and funds are provided to allow the Opposition to do its work.

**Functions of the Opposition include:**

* Ensuring the Government is accountable;
* Taking over the Government when the electorate desires changes in policy;
* Co-operating with the Government in the business of Parliament and
* Presenting alternative policy options.

**Criticisms of the role of the Opposition include:**

* The pace of work of the Government is slowed down;
* Challenges to Government may be misconstrued and operate to the disadvantage of the country and
* The adversarial nature of the British political system tends to stress difference and encourage conflict and rarely seek constructive consensus.

The main Opposition party will form a Shadow Cabinet, with spokespeople taking on the same areas of responsibility as the Government Cabinet.

The role of the Opposition is often seen as negative and as opposing for its own sake. To be effective, Opposition should be seen as constructive, attempting to present itself as an alternative Government with realistic policies.

In periods when the Government has a large majority, the Opposition may become frustrated, believing that Parliamentary Opposition is futile due to the Governments in-built majority. In such a situation, opposition to Government polices may come increasingly from sources outside Parliament such as the media, pressure groups and campaigns of civil disobedience.

**Select Committees**

For each government department, there exists a Parliamentary Select Committee. Select Committees were set up to control the Executive by examining and reporting on certain aspects of policy or administration. They are similar to standing committees in the respect that they are comprised of cross party groups of backbench MPs. However, these committees should not be confused with standing committees that deal with the details of bills prior to being enacted. Select Committees are constituted on a party basis but may be chaired by an MP of any party. They will shadow the work of a Government department and produce a report on the performance of that department usually with recommendations to the House of Commons. The government is expected to reply within two months. Select committees enhance the power of backbench MPs to exercise some control over the government.



Select Committees have the power to see written evidence and to examine witnesses, including Ministers and civil servants; Ministers do not have to attend such inquests unless the House orders them to. These committees monitor the work of the government. MPs usually have a particular interest in that committee and expertise relevant to that committee on which they serve so they are well placed to make criticisms. The committee’s reports are often authoritative and if critical of the Government are unlikely to be ignored.

However, when these committees are too critical or attempt to exert too much influence, they may find their membership changes - membership of committees is by appointed by the party Whips, therefore the influence of select committees can be reduced by changes in their make-up.

**Question Time**

At the start of Parliamentary business on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, is an allocated time when ministers answer MP’s questions. All government ministers are responsible to Parliament for the work of their departments. They are obliged to answer questions concerning their area of responsibility. Most of the questions receive written answers, but some are dealt with at Question Time, ministers take it in turns to answer questions.

##### House of Commons

Oral questions are answered by ministers at question time in the House of Commons. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays oral questions are now taken at the earlier time of between 11.30 am and 12.30 pm. [Prime Minister's questions](http://www.parliament.uk/works/occasion.cfm#pmques) are taken every Wednesday (when the House is sitting) at 12 noon.

An MP may ask up to two oral questions and any number of written questions a day, although he or she may only ask one oral question of a particular minister on any day. An MP is entitled, at the Speaker's discretion, to ask a supplementary question. This is followed by a further answer by the minister, and there may then be further supplementary questions from other MPs.

Answers to questions are prepared in the department of the minister concerned. Ministers are also briefed about related matters which an MP may raise in a 'supplementary' after an oral question has been answered. The minister, though, is personally responsible for both oral and written replies.

There are some subjects where ministers have consistently refused to answer questions - for example, on the security services, or on matters of commercial confidence. Occasionally a response may not be given where a disproportionate level of expense would be incurred in preparing an answer. Questions must be examined by the Table Office to see that they conform to the rules. They may be edited to bring them into line with parliamentary practice.

####

#### Prime Minister’s Question Time

#### Question time in the House of Commons is an important aspect of parliamentary control of Government, when issues and grievances are raised by MPs and information sought about the Government's plans.

Prime Minister's question time usually starts with a routine question from an MP about the Prime Minister's engagements. Following the answer, the MP then raises a particular issue, often one of current political significance. The Leader of the Opposition then follows up on this or another topic. Exchanges may become heated, and this is often the spectacle presented on television. Subjects raised during Prime Minister's question time vary widely and usually include the key issues of the day.

**Second Reading Debates**

This allows MPs to give their opinions on proposed legislation. The Opposition will make its criticisms and the Government must justify their proposals, after which MPs vote.

**Queen’s Speech Debates**

****The State Opening of Parliament marks the start of the parliamentary session. It occurs when Parliament reassembles after a general election, and each subsequent year; it is normally in November.

It is the main ceremonial event of the parliamentary year, attracting large crowds, both in person and watching on television. The Queen drives in state from Buckingham Palace to Westminster.

The Queen's Speech is delivered by the Queen from the Throne in the House of Lords. The speech is given in the presence of members of both Houses, the Commons being summoned to hear the speech by an official known as 'Black Rod'. In a symbol of the Commons' independence, the door to their chamber is slammed in his face and not opened until he has knocked on the door with his staff of office.

Although the speech is made by the Queen, the content of the speech is entirely drawn up by the Government and approved by the Cabinet. It contains an outline of the Government's policies and proposed legislative programme for the new parliamentary session. Following the State Opening, the Government's programme is debated by both Houses. In the Commons the motion is that the House sends an address to the Queen thanking her for the speech, but the debate, which lasts several days, is in fact a chance for MPs to speak on any matter of government policy.

The debate following the Queen’s Speech at the start of each Parliamentary session provides an opportunity for the main Opposition parties to criticize the Government’s proposed programme for the forthcoming Parliamentary session.

**Opposition Days**

On 20 days in each parliamentary session the Opposition parties in the House of Commons can choose subjects for debate.

##### Adjournment Debates

An MP can use a motion to adjourn the House of Commons to raise issues relating to his or her constituency or matters of public concern. There is a half-hour adjournment period at the end of the business of the day.

An MP wishing to raise a matter during the half-hour adjournment period must notify the Speaker in writing. A ballot is held once a week and four MPs gain the right to speak during the following week, the Speaker choosing the fifth. Normally only the MP raising the matter and the minister responsible for replying speak during an adjournment debate.

#####

##### Emergency Debates

House of Commons standing order No.24 allows that any MP wishing to discuss a 'specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration' may, at the end of Question Time, seek leave to move the adjournment of the House. On the very few occasions when leave is granted by the Speaker, the matter is debated for three hours, usually on the following day. Such special adjournment motions are commonly known as emergency debates.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

Parliament is thought to be able to hold the UK Government to account to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways Parliament is thought to be able to hold the UK Government to account.
* Analyse the extent to which Parliament is able to hold the UK government to account.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways Parliament is thought to be able to hold the UK Government to account.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which Parliament is able to hold the UK government to account.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance

**Practice Course Assessment:**

The question below is from the Specimen Paper produced by the SQA. The marking instructions follow. Use these and the information from the section you have just completed to attempt to answer the question.

*One role of parliamentary representatives is to hold the government to account.*

**Evaluate** the effectiveness of parliamentary representatives in holding the government to account.

You should refer to parliamentary representatives in Scotland, the United Kingdom or both in your answer.

**12 marks**

**Marking Instructions:**

* For 12-mark responses, up to 8 marks will be awarded for knowledge and understanding (description, explanation and exemplification) and 4 marks for demonstration of higher-order knowledge and understanding through analysis **or** evaluation.
* Up to 4 marks can be awarded for a range of relevant knowledge which is accurate, relevant and up-to-date. For four marks you must include at least two relevant aspects with detailed and accurate descriptions — these should include the key aspects of the issue.
* Up to 4 marks can be awarded for quality of explanation/ exemplification of knowledge. For four marks at least two aspects of the question must be included. They must be fully explained and relate closely to the key aspects of the question **and** you must include extended, relevant, accurate and up-to-date exemplification.
* Up to four marks can be awarded for analysis/evaluation. This means comments that identify relationships or implications or make judgements. Four marks can be awarded for one extended, accurate and justified analytical or evaluative comment of an insightful nature which relates closely to the key aspects of the question and is exemplified.
* Where a candidate makes more analytical/evaluative points than are required to gain the maximum allocation of 4 marks, these can be credited as knowledge and understanding marks provided they meet the criteria for this.
* Answers to 12-mark questions should demonstrate at least two relevant aspects of knowledge.
* For full marks (12/12), a response **mus**t include a range of points, have detailed description/explanation, include a range of accurate exemplification and analysis or evaluation.
* For full marks in the KU aspect of the question (8 marks), a response **mus**t include a range of points, have detailed explanation, and include accurate exemplification.
* Maximum of 6 marks available (from 8 for KU) if there is no accurate or relevant exemplification.