

Unit 2, section 2.3 (The Prime Minister and Cabinet) background notes

Notes from textbook

The typical number of Cabinet members is 23. The number of senior non-Cabinet posts is 15. Junior ministers are not in the Cabinet and are around 60 in number. There are on average 17 whips. The total number of people in the complete government is around 115, in Westminster.

All members of the government must sit in Parliament. Most members of the government, and ministers, are members of the Commons and have constituencies to look after. The Prime Minister has one too: David Cameron is MP for Witney in Oxfordshire.

All members of the government have to be appointed by the Prime Minister, and can only be dismissed by him/her.

Collective cabinet responsibility and individual ministerial responsibility are important principles: see the definitions. An example of individual ministerial responsibility is David Laws who resigned from the Coalition government after the expenses scandal: he had claimed expenses for a flat he lived in with his lover, but said that his lover was his landlord in order to avoid difficult questions/admitting he was gay. Ministers resign over their own disagreements in Cabinet, also, through CCR.

Prime ministerial style is an important factor. The four main Prime Ministers in the several previous decades were Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and now David Cameron. We can analyse each of their prime ministerial styles, and have done: see the balancer/reformer/innovator and egoist sheet earlier in notes folder, and the associated research.

There exists a useful table on page 277 of the textbook which for the sake of brevity I am not going to reproduce here. It shows the make up of the 2010 Coalition Cabinet.

Remaining functions of cabinet	Main weaknesses of cabinet
Settling ministerial disputes.	Prime minister is now dominant.
Making decisions that cannot be made elsewhere.	Most decisions are made in committees.
Dealing with domestic emergencies.	Meetings are shorter and stage-managed.
Determining presentation of policy.	Large departments have become more independent.
Legitimising decisions made elsewhere.	More decisions are made in bilateral meetings.
Settling coalition disputes.	Much decision making has moved to 10 Downing Street.

A minister without portfolio is a minister who has no fixed role, who is not responsible for any department. Baroness Warsi is a minister without portfolio.

The prime minister's authority and power is questionable. The Prime Minister can:

- Appoint and dismiss ministers.
- Grant honours.
- Lead the civil service.
- Appoint senior judges and bishops.
- Lead the armed forces.
- Lead foreign relations.
- Chair cabinet meetings.

Limitations on prime ministerial power include the following:

- The size of a prime minister's parliamentary majority.
- Unity of the ruling party, for example frequency of backbench revolts.
- Public support and media support and alignment.

Definitions

Cabinet government: A system of government where the cabinet is the central policy-making body.

Core executive: In the United Kingdom, the main body of the Cabinet—the closest to the Prime Minister.

Prime ministerial government: Political circumstances in which the prime minister dominates policy making and the whole machinery of government.

Presidentialism: Where the head of state is the President and a model of Presidential government operates—big separation of powers, etc.

Political leadership: The charismatic qualities of a good leader: his forcefulness and popularity and abilities. All factors which enhance the effectiveness of a leader.

Collective Cabinet responsibility: In the UK, all cabinet decisions must be collectively supported by all members of the government, at least in public, even if the member concerned disagrees with it.

Individual ministerial responsibility: A step down from CCR. This is the principle that Ministers are responsible for the actions of their department and if civil servants within that department do something wrong, the Minister him/herself should resign as the civil servants cannot be named as they must remain anonymous, and the Minister should have correctly advised.

Ministerial resignations since 1997

See the sheet entitled “Recent Ministerial Resignations” in the main section of my folder.