

Thatcher
Major
Blair
Brown
Cameron

) speeches

The Prime Minister & Cabinet

Exam focus: what you need to know.

The development of the office should be known, and above all you should be familiar with the power and influence of the modern Prime Ministers.

Examiners will expect a reasonable good working knowledge of prime ministers from 1979 onwards and you should be able to compare the qualities and styles of PMs Thatcher onwards. Lots of examples of what prime ministers have or have not been able to do need to be known.

Avoid personal comments when writing about the topic.

Key questions

- What are the powers of the prime minister?
- What are the limits to the prime minister's powers?
- Has the prime minister become too powerful?
- In what ways has the office of prime minister changed in recent years?
- Who has power within the executive?

royal prerogative

- who has the power?
- does the Cabinet + Parliament have the power to control the PM.

Evolution of the office of the prime minister

Development in the 18th century

- Early 18th C - office of PM emerged in UK - 1st PM Robert Walpole
- No law was passed saying there would be a PM

- Office emerged because there was a need of it and everyone accepted this development

Walpole chosen because:

- He had the confidence of the King
- He could manage the H of C and get laws passed
- He had the confidence of many members of Parliament
- He could manage a team of minister (cabinet)
- Was a competent administrator
- Could produce the policies necessary to ensure the country was properly run and defended

Development of the office in the 19th & 20th centuries

- Changes taking place were relatively minor
- The role of party leader was added in the 19th C as modern politics emerged
- The right of PM to decide the date of general elections began in the 19th C
- The monarch's ability to influence the choice of ministers and then PM was lost in 1821 and 1834-35 respectively
- The arrival of total war in the 20th C enabled wartime PM's to take on huge additional powers e.g. total control of the workforce and economy in order to win those wars
- Everyone knew there was a 'prime minister' but official recognition came in the official work of authority - Walter Bagehot 1869, when the office of PM was discussed in depth.

— equal within Cabinet

≠ first amongst equals - PRIMUS INTER PARES

How is the executive branch of government structured?

- PM (first amongst equals)
- Cabinet (with perhaps a core cabinet) 20-24
- Junior ministers 70-80
- Civil service

permanent, anonymous, neutral

- But where does the power lie.....?

Westminster village

too much power?

advisors to govt + govt depts.

Alastair Campbell - civil servants
political
- special advisors.

Theories of executive power

- Cabinet government: cabinet members exercise collective responsibility
- Presidential government: Power lies mostly in the hands of the PM = Prime ministerial government
- Core executive = PM + cabinet + cabinet Committees + PM office + Cabinet Office + top civil servants.

traditional

has to be seen to agree - can't disagree publicly else resign
(collective cabinet responsibility)

Sources of the Prime Minister's powers

The royal prerogatives:

- Powers that medieval monarchs had - over time these gradually transferred to prime ministers

was appointed to Cabinet/HoL

Head of a Political Party:

- This gives a PM tremendous influence over policy making through party manifesto
- If PM's party is in power he/she has the ability to put their ideas into practice by making them the laws of the land.
- Not only are specific powers given to the PM during an emergency but there is an expectation by the public that the PM will act decisively.

Head of the executive:

- The PM exercises the role of head of the executive - principal and final decision-taker in the country

first amongst equals (in charge)

primus inter pares.

patronage agenda setting.

^{and influence}
The powers of the prime minister

- Appointment & dismissal of ministers - to hire & fire
- Appointment of Cabinet Committees
- Other appointments - key officials e.g. top Judges, senior members of the armed services
- Control of the Government Agenda
- Control of the Civil Service p.a.n.
- Control of Parliament
- Influence over the media - reflecting PM's standing
- Ability to act in an emergency
- Peerages and Honours
- Represent the country abroad

→ E.U. fiscal treaty → Cameron

Cabinet meets for ~1h per week

Judicial Appointments Committee

→ Wright Commission - members + chairs of select committees
↳ too much PM power elected by MPs, not chosen by PM.

↳ Cameron took the talks.

Aides to the Prime Minister

Various offices exist to help the PM carry out his/her duties. The key ones are as follows.

- Private office - staffed mainly by the civil service to ensure the right information gets to the PM and his/her wishes are communicated outwards
- Press office - Run by a powerful figure who deals with the way in which the PM communicates to the public - also controls media access to the PM
- Policy Advisors - This gives the PM sources of ideas and policies apart from ministers and their departments. Advisors can be very influential.

The PM has the ability to set up a group to recommend policy, or to appoint a special adviser in a particular area, such as drugs policy

UNELECTED = UNACCOUNTABLE

Variable Factors

Several factors may give a PM additional power and influence. Others may reduce the power and influence.

Parliamentary majority

- Electoral performance - success at the polls shows clearly to the party that leader's ideas are popular e.g. Thatcher
- Policy successes - will increase level of prestige but the opposite applies
- Opinion polls - e.g. John Major suffered from poor polls
- Influence over the cabinet - can dominate cabinet by sheer force of personality. Blair insisted on cabinet obedience
- Support in the parliamentary party - Blair had support of party - Major had little support from several backbenchers
- Size of the parliamentary majority - huge majority means bills can be passed easily
- Media support or opposition - this can help or hinder a PM
- Prime Minister's personality - being a strong domineering personality can help
- State of the economy - a healthy economy will usually help a PM
- Patronage - clever use of patronage - rewarding loyalty will strengthen a PM's position
- Party divisions - Unity in the party will strengthen a PM's position
- Possible rivals - powerful rivals in gov't are potential alternative leaders
- Electoral prospects - the nearness of a general election and government's current standing will affect a PM
- The PM is not a president - there is a separate head of state

mid 90s The Sun Con → Lab

"Events, dear boy, events." Harold Macmillan PM
Response to a journalist when asked what is most likely to blow governments off course

→ Press secretary → Cabbie Bertin → previously Andy Coulson

How much power does the PM have?

→ Eurosceptic / ~~Pro~~ Europhile

→ no strong figures in the party
↳ weakness.

→ more power (or feeling of) if opinion polls etc are looking good.

"all political careers end in failure"

→ Enoch Powell

Thatcher, Blair, Major, Brown, Gordon Brown, Falkland Islands, party being the line of Brown, bad opinion polls.

charismatic

Watts and Days (Thatcher)

Limits on a Prime Minister's power

- **The Party** - On the whole the PM's party inside & outside of parliament will support the PM. However, there are cases when this has not happened
- **Public Opinion** - Always an unpredictable force. It was public pressure that forced the Conservatives under Thatcher & Major to abandon the poll tax. Public opinion has been a major factor in preventing radical reform of the health service since 1979
- **Parliament** - Parliament has the power to remove a PM at any time. James Callaghan was removed by a vote in the H of C in 1979. Limited control over the H of L and effective scrutiny powers in select committees, parliament can make life difficult for PMs.
- **The Cabinet** - Up to 2001 Tony Blair did not have real difficulties with his cabinet - they were loyal and supportive. Mrs Thatcher, however, found her first cabinet difficult and she was forced to compromise over Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)

and now

Labour

Debates on prime ministerial power

What are the issues pertaining to the 'presidential' notion?

- Increasing power over appointments
- Dominating policy-making
- Appears as sole national leader rather than cabinet being seen as power base
- Projected much more as a leader by the media
- Spending less time in the House of Commons
- More key advisers working for him and not the government as a whole
- Does PM power curtail parliamentary sovereignty?