

Are UK prime ministers as powerful as it is sometimes claimed?

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The extent of UK prime ministerial power is debatable. Some claim that UK prime ministers are very powerful, others that they are not so because of all the scrutiny their Cabinet goes through that they are responsible for.

In recent years, the prime ministers of the United Kingdom have had their powers restricted not only by not being popular, but the introduction of European Union membership and therefore restrictions on parliamentary sovereignty. These restrictions have also come about due to the parliamentary devolution of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland: the creation of their respective Parliaments or Assemblies. European Union membership has entailed that the European Convention on Human Rights be adhered to, forcing the UK Government to enact the UK-specific Human Rights Act based heavily on everything in the European Convention on Human Rights, thereby not allowing them to have their own say and be sovereign over issues of human rights such as deportation of criminals or immigrants and arrestation and release, taking away power from the Prime Minister and his Cabinet (such as Home Secretary Theresa May), an example of which being the recent case involving the Libyan plane bomber.

The UK prime ministers have always been *primus inter parus*, or first amongst equals in their Cabinet, having equal power in Cabinet meetings, but being head of the government and governing political party, hence “first”. Collective Cabinet Responsibility gives the prime minister more power over his or her Cabinet—Ministers cannot publicly disagree with what the Cabinet rules without having to resign. This rule was specified by a prime minister who

wished to have more power and not have such a divided Cabinet who could potentially publicly go against him and shame the government.

Internationally, at least in the past, the UK Prime Minister has been thought of as incredibly powerful, especially compared to the President of the United States. For example, the US has a written constitution which makes new, modern legislation introduction difficult, there is no such thing as the Royal Prerogative of powers that the President can inherit as the Prime Minister has done, as the US does not have a Royal family, and the separation of powers is much greater—the President, for example, is not allowed to even enter Congress, the US version of the Houses of Parliament, and must speak to a sympathetic Congressman if he or she wants to get anything debated. The Prime Minister’s power compared to the President’s has been envied by many a past US President, including one who said that he wished he “had as much power as the UK Prime Minister”.

Overall, whether the Prime Minister is powerful depends on a lot of things including the checks and balances in place on his or her actions, the level of scrutiny from the opposition, and as Harold Macmillan said, “events, [...] events”.