**PUBLIC AFFAIRS 3 – The Prime Minister and devolution**

**The Prime Minister**

**The Prime Minister’s offices and roles:**

* The Prime Minister
  + The leader of the government, and the government’s main representative in the House of Commons
* First Lord of the Treasury
  + But not the main figure in charge of the Treasury – that’s the Chancellor
  + 10 Downing Street is technically the FLotT’s residency, not the PM’s
* Minister for the Civil Service
  + Another job of the PM’s since 1968
  + Regulates the Civil Service
* Minister for the Union
  + Ensures the government acts on behalf of the entire UK
  + Boris Johnson came up with this office when he was PM

**The Prime Minister**

* The Prime Minister is head of the government – not head of state
* It’s an office that exists through convention rather than statute – essentially it is just the person who can command a majority in the House of Commons
* This tends to be **the leader of the party that has the most seats**
* Even though the office only exists through convention, the PM does have certain special powers – the **prerogative powers** they exercise on behalf of the monarch
* The Prime Minister is also, usually, the only minister to have a private audience with the monarch

**Powers of the Prime Minister – entrusted by the Royal Prerogative:**

* Appoint fellow ministers
* Appoint cabinet committee members
* Chair weekly cabinet meetings
* Meet with the monarch on a weekly basis to inform them about government business
* Recommend passage of government bills for Royal assent
* Recommend dissolution of Parliament for general elections
* Recommend prorogation (suspension) of Parliament for summer recess and other holidays
* Write the King’s Speech (for the State Opening of Parliament)
* Recommend senior appointments to the Church of England, the judiciary, and positions in public corporations (eg. the BBC)
* Recommend recipients of honours and peerages
* Declare war

**How is the Prime Minister held to account?**

* **Public**
  + The PM is an MP like any other and must be elected by their constituency. Their performance also tends to influence how well their party does overall at elections
  + Demonstrations - Brexit, Stop the War, XR
  + Referendums - Scottish independence, Brexit
* **Press**
  + Front pages can have a big impact in particular
  + The Sun famously backed Blair in 1997 – and claimed it tipped the balance
* **Parliament**
  + MPs scrutinise the PM at Prime Minister’s Questions every Wednesday
  + **Select committees** scrutinise government departments in detail
  + If a government holds a slender majority or no majority at all, they may struggle to get legislation passed through Parliament
* **Party**
  + The government “whips” its own party MPs to support it - **but** backbenchers may rebel or threaten to, acting as an “unofficial opposition”
  + 1922 Committee (for Conservatives), Parliamentary Labour Party (for Labour)

**The Prime Minister issues**

* Is the office of Prime Minister becoming too “presidential”, with one person too powerful?
* Boris Johnson [deliberately misled Parliament](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-65913692) as PM, according to a committee - do PMs respect Parliament?
* Additionally, do they respect the public - a central question with regard to Partygate
* Sunak is the third PM since the last general election. Should a PM who assumes office in the middle of a parliamentary term call a snap election?
* The role of unelected advisors perceived to have too much power (such as Alistair Campbell under Blair and Dominic Cummings under Johnson)
* Either lack of regard or over-deference to public opinion and polls by various Prime Ministers
* Is Sunak strict enough with his ministers? He took a long time to sack both [Nadhim Zahawi](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/30/nadhim-zahawi-sacking-the-questions-still-facing-rishi-sunak) and [Dominic Raab](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-65336405)

**Common exam questions**

* What are the duties/powers of the Prime Minister?

**Devolution**

**What sort of state is the UK?**

* There are two types of state: unitary and federal
* **Unitary** states are controlled by one **central** government
* **Federal** states have **regions** with greater autonomy over lawmaking
* The UK remains a unitary state, but power is devolved to some regions
* Devolution is the statutory transfer of power to a subnational level
* Unlike in a federal state, devolved powers are delegated by Westminster – so an act of Parliament could change things
* Also unlike in a federal state, different regions have varying powers

**Devolution in the UK**

* Devolved assemblies:
  + The Scottish Parliament, commonly called Holyrood, was founded in 1999
  + The Welsh Parliament or Senedd was founded in 1999 too
  + The Northern Ireland Assembly - Stormont - dates from 1998
  + The three of them have differing levels of power, with Scotland holding the most autonomy
* What about England?
  + There is no English parliament
  + BUT some regions have some devolved powers

**How do the devolved assemblies work?**

* Members of each parliament/assembly are elected by the public
* The MSPs / MSs / MLAs debate and vote on legislation, just like MPs do in the House of Commons
* Areas in Scotland, Wales and NI are **also** represented by MPs in the House of Commons
* For example if you’re in, say, Edinburgh, you’ll have both a local MP **and** a local MSP (you’ll have local councillors too but that’s a whole different system again)

**What powers do devolved countries have?**

* By default, Westminster holds power across the country
* But the devolved assemblies have powers in particular areas of governance - **it varies depending on the specific deal in place**
* The **Senedd**, for instance, has powers over areas including education, health, agriculture and Welsh language
* The **Scottish Parliament** has power across all policy areas except a relatively short list of **reserved powers** (i.e. reserved by Westminster)
  + These include **foreign affairs, defence, social security** and **overall tax policy**

**Combined authorities**

* Some areas of England also have devolved powers - although not on the scale of, say, Wales, as they can’t make laws
* These areas are the 11 combined authorities
* A combined authority is two or more local authorities (a.k.a. councils) working together across a region (like a sort of ‘super council’)
* Greater Manchester (GMCA) was the very first to be established, in 2011
* There are now 11, mostly in the north
* All 11 CAs now have a directly elected ‘metro mayor’ e.g. in Greater Manchester it’s Andy Burnham, serving a four-year term
* The mayor chairs a cabinet made up of the leaders of each local council
  + In GM there’s also a deputy mayor for policing
  + Each cabinet member has their own portfolio, e.g. housing
* A combined authority’s precise powers vary from region to region – devolved powers typically include public transport, economic prosperity, housing and so on
* It’s increasingly common for the metro mayor to be the region’s police and crime commissioner as well
* [Greater Manchester](https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/) has the most devolved powers, thanks to 2023’s [‘trailblazer’](https://www.mancunianmatters.co.uk/news/28032023-the-trailblazing-devolution-deal-giving-greater-manchester-more-control-than-ever-before/) devolution deal
  + GMCA has control of the region’s NHS budget
  + It also plans to innovate regarding the education system by creating a [“Manchester Baccalaureate”](https://www.mancunianmatters.co.uk/news/09062023-the-manchester-baccalaureate-how-burnham-is-shaking-up-the-education-system/)

**London**

* London is **NOT** a combined authority
* The **Greater London Authority** was formed in 2000 and it’s unlike any other system in the country
* It’s headed by a directly elected mayor (Sadiq Khan) and his cabinet - but they are answerable to an assembly which is also directly elected
* It oversees things like transport, planning and culture, as well as the Metropolitan Police, Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, and Transport for London

Devolution issues

* **Scottish independence** - one referendum failed in 2014 (it attracted 85% turnout, the highest since universal suffrage; Brexit was 72%) but there are calls for a second
* The **West Lothian Question** - named after former West Lothian MP Tam Dalyell
* Is it fair that MPs representing Scottish (or Welsh/Northern Irish) constituencies can vote on matters only affecting England, while English MPs have no say in devolved matters?
* For example, in 2015 the SNP vowed to vote against a bill to relax fox hunting restrictions in England and Wales - [forcing David Cameron to cancel the vote](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/14/foxhunting-vote-shelved-by-tories-in-face-of-snp-opposition)
* The current solution to this issue is [“English Votes for English Laws”](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33370064) (EVEL) - MPs from devolved countries may not vote on bills only affecting England
* But [there is debate](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51378669) about what really counts as England-only because of funding distribution issues
* **Power sharing in Northern Ireland** - currently, there is no devolved government in Northern Ireland because the elected MLAs cannot agree to form an executive
* The Good Friday Agreement (1998) says power must be shared by unionists and republicans
* There’s [widespread desire for reform](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/28/big-changes-needed-power-sharing-northern-ireland-says-70-of-population) as the system is frequently creating political deadlocks
* At what point is a [united Ireland referendum](https://www.politico.eu/article/united-ireland-look-more-likely-brexit-study-uk-belfast/) appropriate?
* How far should English devolution go - should similar deals to Greater Manchester’s Trailblazer Deal be rolled out elsewhere? Should there be more combined authorities?
* Is devolution helping with **levelling up**?
* English devolution creates some [conflict](https://www.mancunianmatters.co.uk/news/09062023-department-for-education-delivers-scathing-verdict-on-burnhams-mbacc/) between regional and central government
* Westminster recently blocked Holyrood’s Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill - using a veto power for the first time. This has huge implications in terms of the limits of devolved powers
* This decision is currently being [challenged in the courts](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-64302496)

**Common exam questions**

* What is devolution?
* What are combined authorities?
* List five issues to do with devolution