

The Cabinet

The Cabinet is made up of the Prime Minister's most senior advisors, most are leaders of or within government departments that help to divide the large responsibilities of the executive to achieve government policy. The role and status of the Cabinet within the executive branch has changed over the years and is dependent on the style of the Prime Minister in office.

The Ministerial Code and Cabinet Manual sets out the roles and functions of Cabinet. Cabinet is there to register and ratify decisions taken across cabinet departments, discuss and debate major issues, review reports on government procedures and progress and settle disputes between departments.

Cabinet committees

Most decisions are actually taken in cabinet committees where more time is available to debate and discuss policy. Cabinet committees are decided by the Prime Minister depending on priorities and where depth of thinking is needed on policies. Some are chaired by the Prime Minister. They are intended to bring collaboration across and between departments to ensure the smooth running of government.

They include: ministerial standing committees which are permanent during the PM's time in office and reflect big areas of policy; ministerial sub-committees which often act on smaller areas of policy and report back to a larger department; ad hoc committees which are set up to respond to particular issues and implementation task forces that work across departments e.g. devolution issues may work across the departments for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Cabinet Meetings

Cabinet meetings vary on the Prime Minister chairing them. Most now happen once a week when Parliament is sitting. They usually last around an hour, are formal in their conduct with ministers sitting in the same place based on the seniority of their department. The Chancellor, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary are referred to as the three most senior posts in Cabinet. Some Prime Ministers who use cabinet less, will often hold meetings with one or two ministers around the weekly cabinet meetings, these are known as bilateral meetings and were popular with Blair.

The Cabinet Office

The Cabinet Office supports the office of the Prime Minister in ensuring the smooth running of government. It coordinates the meetings, minutes and sharing of information across and between government departments.

The Civil Service

The Civil Service are employees of the Crown to implement the work of government. This may be administrative tasks or policy advice. They operate within 4 main principles:

1. Impartiality - members of the civil service work for the Crown not the government of the day and are expected to be politically neutral and not pass political opinions.
2. Anonymity - civil servant work is not identified and they give evidence to parliamentary committees under the direction of ministers.
3. Permanence - civil servants will serve multiple governments, they continue with policy and administration even if there is a change in government
4. Meritocracy - civil servants are generalists - it is a competitive recruitment process and promotion is given on capability and conduct, they cannot be influenced by political appointment

Collective Ministerial Responsibility

This is a core principle of government that ensure that all cabinet members support the government or resign from government if they do not feel able to offer their support. It has 3 main elements:

1. Secrecy - all cabinet discussions are kept confidential and are not to be discussed in public.
2. Binding decisions - any decisions that are made have to be supported in public, even if they are disagreed upon in private. Ministers must resign if they are not able to publicly support government decisions. E.g Philip Hammond resigned as Chancellor in 2019 in response to Johnson's willingness to leave the EU without a deal.
3. Confidence vote - the government must resign if they lose a confidence vote in parliament. E.g. James Callaghan's government was forced to resign in 1979 after its Scottish devolution bill was defeated.

Composition of Cabinet

Cabinet is made up of around 22 senior ministers, most are head of government departments. Each will then have a team, with junior ministers, the size of which varies per department, for example, the Treasury is a much larger team than the Office of the Welsh Secretary and some departments change to reflect the needs of the country, e.g. the introduction of a Brexit Minister in 2016 but no longer needed post 2020.

The Cabinet will hold meetings and take part in cabinet committees.

The Core Executive

Often referred to as the 'heart of government'. The core executive is made up of the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, meetings between the PM and Ministers, The Prime Minister's Office, The Cabinet Office and offices of Department (Cabinet) Ministers as well as top civil servants.

Individual Ministerial Responsibility

The principle that ministers are accountable to Parliament for their personal conduct and the conduct of their departments. The Ministerial Code states that ministers must be 'accurate and truthful' when reporting to Parliament. The Scott Report 1996 clarified that ministers only need resign if they know about any misdemeanours carried out by their staff or if they are responsible for any issues themselves. It was agreed that ministers cannot always be held responsible for all actions of their team (junior minister or civil servant). Ministers may resign as a result of policy failures e.g. James Callaghan as Chancellor in 1967, personal misconduct, e.g. Peter Hain as Secretary of State for Wales after police investigations into political donations or political pressure, e.g. Andrew Mitchell as Chief Whip after calling a police officer a 'pleb' on Downing Street.

Powers of the Executive

1. Prerogative powers - powers of ministers that do not require parliamentary approval, mostly exercised on behalf of the Crown as elected ministers. E.g. making ratifying treaties, international diplomacy, deployment of armed forces, make public appointments, recommend dissolution of parliament, organisation of civil service, granting pardons.
2. Control of legislative agenda - most bills are proposed by the government and the timetable for legislation is controlled by the government
3. Powers of secondary legislation - Acts of Parliament usually affect government departments and require those ministers to implement that legislation. When updates and changes are needed, ministers have the powers to do this without needing a further Act of Parliament

The Prime Minister

The PM is head of the government (the executive branch) and chair of Cabinet. They provide leadership to the country, they are the leader of their party in the House of Commons and lead their cabinet ministers.

The PM must be a member of Parliament, since the late 19th Century, this has been a member of the House of Commons. The PM must be the leader of a political party, usually the largest party in Parliament.

The PM resides at 10 Downing Street and has the civil service and special advisors known as the the Prime Minister's Office as the infrastructure to run government.

Prime ministerial govt/Cabinet
govt/Presidential govt.

The role and power of the Prime Minister often changes based on the holder of office. This gives political commentators reasons to argue for different types of power and government. It is often like an elastic band, a powerful or strong personality as PM often appears more powerful or even presidential at times. Whilst some work collaboratively with their Cabinet e.g David Cameron and is referred to as cabinet government, the PM is considered to be 'first among equals. Other Prime Ministers choose to exert their own power. This is often called prime ministerial government where the Prime Minister appears dominant within the executive branch, for example Boris Johnson is appearing more dominant than his cabinet colleagues. When Prime Ministers are very dominant, they may even be referred to as presidential. For example, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair are seen as examples of PMs who pushed their authority to the maximum. However, this theory is often criticised as presidents are directly elected heads of state and the British political system does not allow for this.

A Prime Minister's power is dependent on their leadership and reputation, influenced by their political success, high standing in their party and the country as well as their personalities. More powerful PMs have also benefitted from large parliamentary majorities and favourable external circumstances such as strong economies, winning a war and successful policy implementation.

Resources of the Prime Minister

The Prime Minister's Office - around 190 people based at No. 10, career civil servants and special advisors help with the the smooth running of government. They provide policy advice (Policy and Implementation Unit) and communicate government policy to the country.

Power of patronage - appointment and dismissal of key roles.

The Cabinet system - has a series of ministers to delegate power to on areas of policy.

Political party - an established machine to provide support and usually a majority in Parliament to support power.

Public standing - they are the public face of the country.

Policy-making role - has power to make and deliver on policies they believe are right for the country.

Role of the executive

The executive has 3 main functions:

Making policy decisions - directing the country's policy direction, implement those policies and ensuring their success both home and abroad.

Proposing legislation - Most primary legislation (bills) start with the executive. Laws reflect the policies put forward by the government that they were elected to deliver upon. The executive has secondary legislation powers meaning that ministers can amend laws previously passed within their areas without a new act of Parliament. E.g. the education minister can make changes to school policies referred to in the Education Act 2002 without a new Act of Parliament

Proposing a budget - the Chancellor creates a budget outlining government spending based on the government's policy priorities and the needs of the country.

Role of the Prime Minister

Their key roles are:

Political leadership - deciding policy and strategy, shaping the government's legislative programme whilst in office.

National leadership - leader of the country, leading on national security and key communicator with and for the nation.

Appointing the government - decides on cabinet departments necessary for the country's progress and appointing and dismissing cabinet ministers.

Chairing the cabinet - chairs meetings, sets the agenda for discussion and decides on cabinet committees and bilateral meetings with ministers.

Managing the executive - responsible for ensuring the smooth running of government, including the civil service.

Prerogative powers - has the power to act without parliamentary approval in areas such as deployment of troops and recommending public appointments.

Managing relations with parliament - makes statements to, answers questions in the House of Commons.

Representing the UK in international affairs - has the highest level of diplomacy in the country.

Special Advisors

Ministers are also able to appoint special advisors for the duration of their role. These are temporary appointments rather than enjoying the permanence of the civil service. They can be specialists in areas of policy or advise on communications (often known as spin doctors e.g Alistair Campbell was first given this title under Tony Blair)