

Elective dictatorship

A government that dominates Parliament, usually due to a large majority, and therefore has few limits on its power.

Executive Dominance

A parliamentary system that places considerable power in the hands of the Prime Minister and Cabinet through their ability to control the House of Commons, particularly in a majority government situation

The opposition is effective in holding the government to account

1. The leader of the opposition is able to ask 6 questions and supplementaries each week in the House of Commons - it is a regular feature to ask the government difficult questions. A good leader can often cast doubt on the success of the PM e.g. Jeremy Corbyn was seen as a fierce adversary of Theresa May who often appeared awkward at PMQs.
2. When the government has a small parliamentary majority, the opposition plays a key role in swaying MPs to vote against the government. E.g. Theresa May's government found it difficult to achieve Brexit votes with so many of her own party voting against her.

The opposition is not effective in holding the government to account

1. An ineffective leader of the opposition is often no match for the PM. For example, Iain Duncan-Smith was a poor adversary to the success of Tony Blair at PMQs.
2. When the government has a large parliamentary majority, it is difficult for the opposition to have any impact on parliamentary votes and amendments, e.g. Tony Blair had a 179 majority with the Conservative Party being in the political wilderness for 13 years.
3. The opposition has limited opportunity to control the parliamentary agenda and influence legislation.
4. A party that has recently lost a general election and does not have the civil service infrastructure of the opposition finds it difficult to influence the parliamentary agenda.

Parliamentary scrutiny of the executive

The executive (PM and Cabinet) is scrutinised (powers checked) in a variety of ways:

1. Parliamentary questions
2. The role of the opposition
3. Select committees

Parliamentary Sovereignty

A constitutional principle of the UK government that grants Parliament ultimate authority in terms of the creation laws. Parliament can establish laws on any subject it chooses. Legislation produced by Parliament cannot be overturned by any higher authority and no parliament can bind future parliaments. The principle also holds that the Westminster Parliament is the supreme law making body, however the EU and devolved governments do challenge these principles as they have power to legislate on some issues. The UK seeks to re-establish this sovereignty with the withdrawal from the EU. Equally all, devolved legislation requires royal assent and therefore pulls authority back to the UK government.

Prime minister/minister's questions
are effective

1. The leaders of opposition parties are able to ask weekly questions of the prime minister. They can ask difficult questions and raise their own party stance on key issues.

2. Backbench MPs are able to ask regular questions of the the PM or Dept Ministers. Urgent or important issues can be discussed regularly.

Prime minister/minister's questions
are not effective

1. PM or Ministers are only available in 30 minute intervals, it is often difficult for everyone to ask their questions in order to hold the executive to account.
2. Question time is often criticised for being more theatrical than effectively holding the government to account.
3. Back bench MPs often ask 'planted' questions that seek to make their party look good or raise their own profile than hold the government to account.

Select committees do not
effectively scrutinise the executive

1. The make up of a select committee is determined by the proportion of members of each party in Parliament. A government with a large parliamentary majority will have more members of a select committee to influence investigations and decisions.
2. Select committees cannot have access to all documents requested and ministers and civil servants may not always answer all questions posed to them.
3. The executive does not need to act upon the recommendations made by a select committee - they can simply ignore them.
4. Select committees are often criticised for bullying questioning tactics reducing their credibility.
5. Not all members of select committees regularly attend to make their work worthwhile.

Select committees effectively
scrutinise the executive

1. Select committees have the time and resources to investigate intricate elements of government policy and procedure.
2. Select committees have the authority to question ministers, civil servants and experts to scrutinise the work of government.
3. After thorough investigations, most recommendations from select committees are accepted by government.
4. Leaders of select committees are not elected by members of parliament, ensuring their independence in effectively holding the government to account.

Where does power lie in the UK?

Debates rage as to where power is held within the UK system of government. The lack of a codified constitution means that there is no complete separation of powers making the answer to this question more complicated. With a strong parliamentary majority, the executive is often accused of being an elected dictatorship, with little able to defeat them. In contrast, a strong personality as Prime Minister can often be accused of marginalising cabinet government in favour of prime ministerial or even presidential government. When faced with party differences, cabinet government may be more prevalent as a prime minister seeks to keep harmony to ensure success. Similarly, parliamentary government may be more collegiate when the executive has a small majority and may need to seek more compromises and cross party working.